

North Star

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North Star

by [cold_nights_summer_days](#)

Summary

They came in the middle of the night.

The signs were all there. His mother sewing their valuables into the lining of their coats. Photos and papers being burned in the fireplace. His father not returning from work that evening. Later, Peter would realize that the signs were there. Later, Peter realized his parents intended they escape.

They did not escape. They were arrested.

An Irondad au of the book Between Shades of Grey by Ruta Sepetys

Notes

Hey! I told you I'd be posting more the next day . . . and this time I was actually right! This is my fic for the ironadad big bang 2020! I'm back at it with another historical au, and this time the whole fic is finished before hand so there shouldn't be any interruptions in my posting schedule. Speaking of which, I should be posting weekly on Mondays. I might switch to posting bi-weekly in the future, but we'll see how this pans out first!

I'd like to thank [doctornineandthreequarters](#) and [Bucket 1917](#) for listening to me rant about this story and helping me when I couldn't seem to figure it out! Jaime and Misty, I love you guys so much! I'd also like to thank my partner in crime for taking over our exchange so I could double down and work on this <3

Lastly, but certainly not least, the art for this story is done by [IcedAquarius](#)! It's absolutely amazing! They were such a joy to work with on this event and I'm grateful I got the opportunity.

P.S., i royally screwed around with family relations in this fic . . . so here's an explanation :) Harley is Ben and May's son, which makes him and Peter cousins in this fic. Morgan is also here, but Tony and Pepper aren't her parents.

Without further adieu, enjoy the story!

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Chapter One

The warm June evening found Peter settled at his desk, preparing to write his cousin a letter. It had been a few weeks since he'd received anything from Harley. That was longer than usual. Normally they wrote each other constantly, curious of what was happening to the other since they'd seen them last.

Peter carefully wrote the date at the top of paper sitting in front of him as a light breeze blew through the open window. The smell of pine trees and freshly planted flowers pervaded the room. Peter breathed deeply, enjoying their scent. Summer had always been his favorite season, and his mother's too.

They didn't knock when they came. They pounded on the door with heavy fists, the sharp noise echoing throughout the apartment. Peter jumped in his chair, and the pen fell to the floor. Nobody had ever come knocking this late, nor so harshly. Nobody they knew had a reason to. Barely a minute passed before his mother came rushing into the room. Despite trying to appear calm, Peter could see the worry evident in her eyes.

"Mom, who—"

"Shhh, peter. Stay here, okay?" She whispered urgently. Peter stared at her with wide eyes, dumbfounded. "Don't come out of your room unless I come get you."

Peter nodded. His mother left as quickly as she had come, like a spring storm. She closed the door tightly behind her as she left. Whoever was outside pounded on the door again before Peter heard her open it. Loud shouting filled the apartment, yelling words he couldn't understand. They were all in Russian.

He knew instantly who they were. They were the NKVD, or Russian police. Peter had heard kids talking about them at school in hushed tones, sharing stories about them kidnapping entire families in the middle of the night. Peter hadn't believed them. He hadn't *wanted* to.

Now they were standing in his living room and screaming at his mother, he had no choice. The protective part of Peter wanted to go out into the living room. It was unfair to leave his mother out there alone. But the scared part of him decided to listen to her and stay put. He tried to convince himself that they were simply at the wrong apartment, that the NKVD couldn't be there for them. They had done nothing to deserve being arrested.

After a few minutes of arguing, Mary opened the door to Peter's bedroom. Peter wondered how she appeared so calm. Peter certainly didn't feel that way.

"Pack a suitcase." She instructed, grabbing Peter's suitcase from the top shelf of his closet and laying it on his bed. "We only have fifteen minutes. You need to pack what will be useful, not necessarily what has meaning. Bring socks and coats, things like that."

"Where are we going?" Peter asked. He was still in his desk chair, the pencil by his feet on the floor.

"I don't know, sweetheart. But we'll find out, won't we?" With that Mary left, leaving Peter to pack on his own. He pulled several shirts from their hangers and threw them haphazardly into the suitcase. Pants and socks. There was only enough space left for a few more items once he had packed his clothes.

Peter looked around the room critically. He picked up a framed photo from his nightstand and placed it on top of the things he had already packed carefully. A set of pens and pencils, along with a pad of paper, were put in next. Where was his sketch book? Peter searched the room, but he couldn't find it anywhere.

He was pulled from his search by the sound of breaking glass. Dragging his suitcase out to the living room, he saw his mom smashing their dishes on the kitchen floor. Shock filled him. Those had been a gift for his parents' tenth anniversary, why on earth would she be destroying them?

When Peter asked her, she evaded the question by telling him to go change. Peter looked down at what he was wearing. In all the confusion he had forgotten to change out of his pajamas. He ran back to his room and changed into the first outfit he saw, his school uniform pants and a blue polo shirt. His mom shook her head at him when he entered the kitchen again, but she didn't have time to tell him to change again before the NKVD burst into the door.

They had been waiting outside until they heard Mary smashing dishes. They screamed at her for destroying Soviet property before promptly escorting the pair of them out the door and into the street. All the streetlights had been turned off, casting a sinister shadow over the neighborhood. Through the darkness Peter saw the headlights of a truck waiting for them in the road.

"*Davai!*" The NKVD guards shouted, shoving them forcefully towards the waiting truck. Mary climbed into the back first and helped Peter lift their suitcases before pulling him in after her. Inside the truck were two benches, most of the seats filled with other people and their luggage.

Peter took a seat next to his mother on one of the benches and eyed the other passengers uneasily. None of them looked like criminals either. In fact, some of them were his neighbors and people that worked with his father at the university. He could have sworn one of them was his second year teacher, Mrs. Dirgela, but it was too dark to be sure.

Nobody in the truck spoke to each other. They chose instead to stare at their laps or the floor and tightly clutch what little pieces of home they'd managed to bring with them. Some of the people hadn't brought anything at all.

Peter shivered despite the warm night. What had any of them done to deserve being arrested in the middle of the night like traitors of the state? Where were the NKVD taking them? More importantly, what were the NKVD going to do with them?

As the night (morning?) wore on, the truck stopped several times to pick up more people. Some Peter recognized, others he didn't. Many of them were women and children. At some point, the people began to talk, albeit hushed. Nobody wanted to risk making the NKVD angry. Peter wondered if they'd been as harsh with all of them as they had been with him and his mother.

"Does anyone know what's going on?" A particularly harried looking mother asked. She had two daughters who couldn't be more than six clutched tightly in her arms. Both looked dangerously close to tears, if not full-blown tantrums.

"We've been arrested." Answered the man sitting across from her. He showed no sign of being rushed out the door, his suit unwrinkled and demeanor unruffled.

"But whatever for? My girls certainly didn't commit a crime, and neither did I."

"The Soviets arrest whoever they want, whether they've done anything or not. They don't care who you are."

Lithuania had been annexed into the Soviet Union last August, and not long after, they began moving troops into the country. Peter remembered hearing the news and complaining about it at the dinner table that evening. His father had shushed him promptly and gave him strict instructions to never question the Soviets. Peter never voiced his discontent after that, but he certainly thought about it. Ow to censor his words.

“That’s stupid,” Peter said, exhausted. He hadn’t meant to say it out loud, but he was too tired and confused right now to censor his words. They had already been arrested, anyway. What more would they do? Everyone in the truck stared at him, eyes wide. His mother shushed him even though the words had already left his mouth. The man in the suit was the one who spoke next.

“Don’t say such things. If they don’t mind arresting us for nothing, they certainly would have no qualms beating you for saying something against them.”

The two little girls began to cry. Their mother tried to soothe them quickly, murmuring empty reassurances in their ears. This did little to quiet them, and soon the other children began to cry, too. The truck stopped abruptly, jostling the passengers against each other roughly. Two NKVD officers appeared at the back.

“*Bud spokoyen!*” They yelled in unison. The passengers snapped their attention to them. They couldn’t understand the Russian words.

“They’re telling us to be quiet,” Mary translated quickly. She had studied abroad at the university in Moscow when she was younger as some part of exchange program.

“Ask them where we’re going,” Someone suggested. Mary complied, turning to ask the officers politely. The taller of the two laughed, but it was the shorter one who answered.

“*Ad.*”

Hell.



The truck pulled into a train station as the sun began to crest the horizon. It wasn’t the main station in Kaunas, like one might have expected. It was a countryside depot that Peter had never seen (or even heard of) before. Some people in the truck wondered aloud why they were being taken to an out of the way spot, though Peter found that part to be obvious. The Russians didn’t want anyone to know about what they were doing, or else they wouldn’t kidnap people in the middle of the night and swiftly whisk them off to somewhere else. The ‘why’, however, eluded him. What had

they done?

A few minutes after the truck stopped, the two NKVD officers reappeared and yelled at the passengers to get out. Everyone moved slowly, as if their veins were filled with lead. Most of them had been awake since midnight, if not earlier.

“*Davai!*” They yelled, prodding the slowest ones with the ends of their rifles. Peter gripped his mother’s hand tightly, unwilling to be separated in the chaos. He glanced around. The station was overcrowded, masses of Lithuanians being corralled towards the red train stopped in the middle of it all. The cars were wooden and crudely built, certainly not meant for passengers. They were more suited to livestock and farm equipment.

NKVD officers were everywhere as well. They all looked the same in Peter’s eyes. Harsh faces, same olive-green uniforms, and firearms drawn. He wanted to stay as far away from them as possible, but his mother was pulling them towards one of them holding a clipboard. When she tried to speak to him, the officer looked down at her and twisted his face in disgust.

Mary asked the man a question in Russian. His eyes held a hint of confusion before he hid it and answered her, pointing off toward the beginning of the train. Mary turned to leave, taking Peter with her. The car the officer pointed to was already packed with other Lithuanians and their luggage. Peter couldn’t see how they were going to fit in there.

Peter climbed into the crowded car first at his mother’s insistence. It was difficult. Between the fatigue and the nerves, his limbs felt like jelly. Once he was inside his mother handed his luggage to him, keeping hers at her side. Peter quirked an eyebrow at her, but Mary ignored him, eyes fixating on something behind Peter. Peter watched as something like recognition flash in her features before it changed to relief and then finally sadness. What was she doing?

“I’m going to find your father,” Mary said when he asked. Peter shook his head. *Please don’t leave me here alone.*

“Let me come with you.”

“No, sweetheart. I’ll be back soon, okay?” Peter shook his head again. He didn’t want to be left alone with a train car full of people he’d never met before.

“I won’t be gone long, I promise. Be sure to keep your luggage close. Don’t let anyone take anything from you.”

“Please don’t leave me here,” Peter pleaded, eyes wet. The station was too busy, the NKVD too cruel. Peter was afraid that if she left now, she might not come back. “Just let me come with you —”

“No.” His mother said finally. He could see tears in her eyes, too. “I’m going to go find Richard, and then I’ll be back.”

With that she left, not leaving room for Peter to argue with her anymore. He watched as she went, desperate to keep an eye on her, until he couldn’t see her anymore. She blended into the crowd of soon to be refugees effortlessly. Peter sat on the dusty floor of the train car, feet hanging over the edge. He couldn’t bring himself to stop watching the crowd.

A few meters away stood a family of three; a mother, a teenage daughter, and a son who couldn’t be more than ten years old. The boy was crying as an NKVD officer tried to separate them. Peter couldn’t hear what was being said, but he saw a golden pocket watch glint in the early morning sun

as the mother passed it to the officer. The officer left them alone after that. Peter watched as the family found a car and climbed in. He wondered where their father was. Was he in the same place as his own?

Peter watched several more similar exchanges occur over the course of the day, never once leaving his spot. Even with the door open he could barely breathe. The car was stuffy and smelled sour. He didn't dare leave his post, even when he received several unpleasant looks from surrounding officers. He was waiting for his mother to come back.

When nightfall came, Peter was forced into the car by the grumpy NKVD. They closed the door against his protests. The train car was thrown into almost complete darkness, save for the moonlight streaming through the cracks in the ceiling. Peter pulled his knees to his chest and leaned his head against the dusty wall. If he listened hard enough, he could hear the sound of the NKVD talking and laughing. Their voices were boisterous and rough.

The noise inside the car wasn't much better. It was packed to the brim with forty-six people, much more than Peter could have imagined could have fit in such a small space. He bumped into someone else with every move, no matter how small. There were a million different conversations about a million different things.

Peter could feel the air pressing in on him. There were too many people, too much noise. Where was his mother? Was she okay? Had she found his father? He had too many questions and not enough answers.

Nausea welled in his stomach alongside a deep sense of dread that had been growing since Mary left him to find Richard. Peter's chest hurt like it never had before, like vines were twisting around his lungs and forcing out the air. Only minutes earlier it had been unbearably hot, but now ice seemed to flow through Peter's veins instead of blood.

Oh my god oh my god oh my god. What's happening—

Distantly, Peter registered the feel of strong hands guiding him back to the ground. He hadn't even remembered standing up. Now he also noticed that everyone had (thankfully) gone quiet.

"I need you to breathe," Someone said. The voice was calm, soothing. It sounded familiar, but Peter couldn't figure out why.

"I—I'm trying—" Peter stammered. The harder he tried, the tighter the vines constricted.

"Don't try to talk. Just focus on breathing. Match my breaths," The calm voice responded, exaggerating their breaths to make it easier for Peter to follow along. After several minutes, Peter had settled down enough to focus on what was going on around him. Even in the dark he could tell that everyone's eyes were on him. Embarrassment was added to the ever-growing list of emotions churning in his head like a stormy ocean.

"What just happened?" He asked no one in particular. A man next to him—was he the one who helped?—was the one to answer. Peter couldn't make out many of his features in the faint light, but he noted the man's strong jaw. He would need a sharpened charcoal to capture it correctly.

"It's called a panic attack. It can happen to anyone, but they usually occur when you're overwhelmed, or stressed."

"Thank you, um—" Peter cut himself off, unsure of how to address the man. Luckily, he supplied his name.

"Tony Stark," He said, reaching out for a handshake. Peter took it clumsily, embarrassed about his still clammy hands.

"Thank you, Mr. Stark." Mr. Stark smiled, though he watched Peter with an expectant look. It took Peter nearly a minute to understand what it meant.

"And, um, my name is Peter. Parker."

"Nice to meet you, Peter." Tony replied, immediately outwardly cringing at his choice of words. A scoff rang out from somewhere to Peter's left, but he'd been too preoccupied with the anxiety still tugging at him to notice that or the recognition in Mr. Stark's eyes.

Instead of dwelling on his recognition, Tony glanced at the rag-tag group of deportees surrounding him. They looked at him with wide eyes, wondering what he would do next.

"Does anyone have any food to spare?" He asked. The kid was still shaking harder than he would have liked, and some food couldn't hurt. When was the last time he'd eaten? The wide eyed faces stared at him blankly for a moment before someone began to dig around in a suitcase, eventually producing a piece of bread. It wasn't enough. Tony sighed, but he was grateful.

Peter looked at him curiously, eyes red and puffy, when Mr. Stark handed him the bread.

"Eat it. You'll feel better," Tony assured him. When Peter asked how he knew so much about these things—panic attacks, he remembered—Tony responded with, "I have experience." Peter wondered if he was a doctor. Doctors would know things like this, right? Probably. Definitely.

Five minutes later, the shaking began to subside. Peter felt that he had regained some semblance of control, but even then, he knew that wasn't true. He wasn't in control of anything, and all he could hope was that the puppet master—whoever that was—didn't yank the strings too roughly.

Once Mr. Stark had deemed Peter calm enough, he instructed him to rest. Peter didn't argue. Usually he didn't like being babied, by strangers no less, but exhaustion tugged at his bones. When was the last time he had slept?

Sleeping in the car, unsurprisingly, was even more difficult than simply sitting in it. Because he was one of the younger passengers, Peter was given a space on the wooden planks installed as shelves on the back wall. He was forced to share the space with another boy near his age that he would soon learn to be Harry Osborn. He would also learn that he was the son of a military officer, though that didn't come as a shock. Peter could tell from the way Harry held himself that he was used to the finer things in life.

Between the stuffy air, cramped space, and splintery shelf that hardly counted as a mattress, Peter could barely lay still long enough to doze. Harry seemed to be in the same situation, his elbow digging into Peter's spine every time he shifted. Eventually, Peter couldn't stand it anymore.

"Can you please stop moving?" He asked, rolling over to face Harry. In turn, Harry turned to face him, elbowing Peter *yet again*. There was a loud "shhhh" from somewhere nearby, but Peter couldn't pinpoint who'd said it.

"Sorry," Harry whispered curtly. Peter rolled his eyes in the darkness. It's not like he asked the other boy to do something crazy. Was not being constantly elbowed too much to ask for? When Harry's face twisted in the darkness, Peter realized he had accidentally said that out loud.

"No," He exhaled. "It's just been a long day. I'm not trying to take it out on you."

“Oh,” Peter replied dumbly. And then, “Where do you think we’re going?” Peter thought that since he was the son of a military officer, maybe he had heard something.

“I don’t know. Russia probably.”

“Why now?”

“Everyone’s focused on Hitler. Nobody cares what Russia is doing under the table. They probably don’t even know.”

Another “shhh” echoed from the darkness. Peter wondered why they even bothered. Their conversation was over, anyway. Peter turned to face the wall, hoping to catch some semblance of rest before daylight. Harry, however, didn’t sleep at all that night, Peter’s question nagging at his mind.

Where are we going?

Chapter Two

Chapter Summary

Harry, Peter, and Morgan go on an adventure :)

Chapter Notes

So it turns out I'm very impatient and didn't want to wait until next Monday to post. I've decided to update bi-weekly on Mondays and Thursdays.

Thank you to everyone who came back for chapter two! I hope you enjoy it!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Peter was pulled from his doze—if it could even be called that—by the screeching of train wheels. He tried to sit up, banging his head on the shelf above him. Peter cursed. Now he had a headache to contend with on top of the rest of his problems. With that, the rest of Peter's problems and the events of yesterday rushed to the forefront of his mind. He hadn't eaten since late yesterday afternoon, and it had been even longer since he'd had anything to drink. And—

His mother was still gone. A fresh wave of anxiety washed over Peter like a rogue wave, drowning out everything else. Where did she go yesterday?

“Are we moving?” Harry asked, also woken up from the loud noise. Peter looked at him curiously before shaking his head. It didn't feel like they were moving . . . but then why did they hear the screech of train wheels?

“It sounds like they're attaching another car,” Replied the man in a suit. Enough sunlight streamed through the slats in the roof to illuminate, albeit dimly, the other passengers. Peter recognized him as the same man he'd been forced into the truck with the other night. His suit was wrinkled now, its black fabric covered in a light layer of dirt from the floor.

“Why would they do that?” The woman next to him asked. He simply shrugged.

“Because we're all going to the same place.”

Someone else scoffed, an older looking man with a twisted face. Peter wondered if that was just an expression or if he really looked like that. Peter figured that either way, he would be an unpleasant subject to draw.

"Its probably the people who were deported the day before us. Or even people who were deported at the same time and taken to a different station," Mr. Stark answered coolly. Peter couldn't see him from his perch on one of the shelves, but he recognized the voice. The man with the twisted face rolled his eyes.

“Don't have to be a genius to figure that one out,” He said. Peter couldn't help the words that came

from his mouth next. Harry suppressed a laugh beside him.

“No, but it certainly helps.”

“Excuse you, boy! How dare you—”

“Oh, do be quiet. I think we are all in agreement when we say your negative remarks aren’t helping anyone, not even yourself.” Mr. Stark said. The man sulked but said nothing more. A low chatter began to spread throughout the car, people eager to distract themselves, if only for a minute. Peter took the chance to crawl over (or on) Harry and slip down to the floor. The air was still hot and musty, stifling enough to make Peter’s stomach turn.

Almost on cue, the door to the train car slid open and a fresh summer breeze blew in. Before people could move, the NKVD had guns pointing at them and yelled at them to stay inside. Once they believed everyone to be in compliance, they moved on to the next car.

Peter quickly resumed his previous spot by the door and scanned the platform for any sign of his mother. He saw no other fellow Lithuanians, or ones that could move anyway. Scattered off to the side were several bodies, most of them children. Bile rose in Peter’s throat. The NKVD simply moved around them, mostly pretending that they weren’t there. Peter wondered if the NKVD were going to simply leave them there on the concrete.

Peering around to make sure that no guards were watching, Peter leaned out of the car. Holding the rusty metal of the door frame for support, he craned his neck to see if the man in the suit was correct. He was. Peter could see several mechanics attaching the new train to the end of theirs.

Caught up in observing, Peter had no idea an NVKD officer was near until there was a gun in his face. Peter froze when the cold metal of the rifle’s barrel was pressed against his forehead. He couldn’t understand the harsh Russian streaming angrily from the officer’s mouth.

Several pairs of hands tugged on Peter’s shirt, roughly pulling him deeper inside the car. A sharp pain erupted in his calf, but Peter wasn’t as concerned about that as he probably should have been. He whispered a quick thank you to those around him. Peter couldn’t believe that he’d frozen. What would have happened if nobody helped him? Would he have been just another kid laying on the platform, face down in a pool of blood?

Most likely. Peter shuddered at the thought. He’d never even seen a gun until two nights ago, and even then, none had been explicitly pointed, or shoved, at him. Peter could still feel the cold tip of the barrel against his chest. He shivered in the otherwise warm air.

When the adrenaline began to wear off, the pain in Peter’s calf worsened. He took notice of it only now and found himself wishing he hadn’t. The leg of his pants had been ripped, leaving behind frayed and jagged edges. Pulling back the fabric, Peter carefully inspected the wound.

It was a cut running all the way from the back of his knee to nearly his ankle. Peter couldn’t see much of it through the blood and dirt. Harry, who was sitting next to him, looked at Peter worriedly.

“How did that happen?” He asked, eyebrows furrowed together. Peter shrugged.

“Must have happened when they were pulling me back inside . . .” Peter said, words trailing off as he continued to poke and prod at the injury. He gritted his teeth, each touch painful.

“What are we going to do about it?”

“Nothing,” Peter’s attention shifted from his calf to Harry, who was wearing a concerned look. “It

hurts, but it'll heal eventually. Why make a big deal about it?"

"Because it looks serious, that's why."

"I'm sure it won't look so bad once the blood's gone."

The only problem was, there was nothing to clean the wound with. Peter did the best he could with a piece of fabric torn from his already tattered pants and his spit. It wasn't sanitary by any stretch of the imagination, but he figured that his own spit was better than the dirt and rust of a Soviet train. It was all about perspective.

Harry was worried that it would become infected, and frankly Peter was too, but there were more pressing matters at hand. Who was on the new train, and more importantly, was any of them his father? Peter was still worried about his mother, of course, but at the very least he knew they were both at the train station.

Later that day, a plan had begun to form in Peter's mind. He studied the guards on the platform (he was careful not to lean out again, afraid of what may transpire). There were nearly a hundred, if Peter's numbers were correct. The guard who almost shot Peter, along with another shorter one, patrolled the area near their car once every ten minutes. Aside from them, there were officers posted every twenty feet along the platform.

(Peter wondered why they bothered to make sure nobody escaped. They were at a train station in the middle of the country. There was nowhere to run, assuming anybody made it off the platform alive. A mere show of strength, perhaps?)

With a little more observation, he also noticed that there was a hole the size of a dinner plate in the corner of their train car. He guessed that each car had a similar hole. That meant that if Peter could time it right, he could sneak out of the car and crawl under it. From there he could crawl from car to car, asking if there was a Mary or Richard Parker.

Peter thought his plan, while risky, was airtight. Harry did not.

"That's crazy, Peter," He whispered harshly, shaking his head. "What if you get caught? They'll shoot you for real this time."

"Getting shot is probably better than going to wherever they're taking us," Peter replied. Harry's arguing was pointless; Peter had already made up his mind on the matter. He planned to wait for nightfall, hoping the darkness would aid in his stealth. "They're my parents. I have to go."

"No, you don't—they wouldn't want you to. They wouldn't want you to get killed trying to find them."

"Easy. I won't get killed."

"You can't guarantee that."

"If you're so worried, then come with me."

Harry pursed his lips and glared at Peter the best he could. Peter stared back at him. Harry sighed, knowing he'd lost this argument. Hell, he knew that he would do the same thing if he was in Peter's shoes. All he could do now is go with him and hope they didn't get caught.

The sun, almost as if it was trying to prevent Peter's plans, had set later than usual. Peter found his eyes drifting closed, his limbs heavy, and his mind slow despite his nerves. Harry used this against him several times to try and get him to stop. Peter shook himself awake each time, determined.

Peter's plan hit another snag when the man who had helped him yesterday—Mr. Stark, he reminded himself—caught sight of him trying to quietly lower himself to the ground. His feet were almost touching the concrete when he was suddenly hoisted back in with a grunt.

"Where do you think you're going, kid?" Mr. Stark asked. Peter looked at him with wide eyes. He barely knew this man—not at all, actually—so why did he care?

"To find my parents," Peter said matter-of-factly, his voice defiant. Mr. Stark looked at the kid with sad eyes, his voice softer the next time he spoke.

"You can't. Peter, I know it hurts, but they wouldn't want you to do this."

Mr. Stark spoke as if he actually knew the people he was talking about. But when Peter tried to speak again, Harry talked over him.

"I already tried that. He won't listen." He said coolly. Peter glanced between the two of them, angry that they thought they could stop him from doing this. He knew that he had to jump soon, though, if he was going to avoid getting caught.

Without warning, Peter twisted out of Mr. Stark's grasp (for he had still been holding his arm from pulling him back inside) and dropped to the ground. His calf stung from the impact, but he remained otherwise unharmed. From above him, he could hear the two whisper-shouting at him to come back. When Peter ignored them in favor of rolling under the car and hiding behind a wheel, he heard a thud.

Next to him was Harry Osborn wearing the most disappointed look Peter had ever seen on anyone. Once he was safely hidden behind a wheel as well, he cursed at Peter. Well, there had been some sort of, "How could you do this?" mixed somewhere in there, but Peter chose to ignore it.

"I didn't tell you to follow me! You did this all on your own!" Peter's voice had been too loud, drawing the attention of the nearest NKVD officer. Peter's heart began to race as he heard footsteps draw nearer, accompanied by a flashlight beam. Afraid that the officer would spot them, both boys curled in on themselves. The officer said (or spat, really) something in Russian, presumably about the disturbance. Peter was shocked to hear Mr. Stark answer in fluent Russian. Even his accent was similar to those of the NKVD.

Peter let out a breath he hadn't even realized he'd been holding when the officer walked away, seemingly satisfied with whatever answer Mr. Stark had given him. Peter half expected him to drop down next to them. There was indeed another thud as someone else dropped to the ground, but it wasn't even someone Peter had seen before.

It was a little girl. She wore a blue dress with tiny yellow flowers and her deep brown hair was loose. She wore a mischievous grin on her face. Peter and Harry looked at her nervously, unsure of what to do. Moments later, they heard a shout from above them.

"Morgan!" A woman, presumably her mother, cried. A chorus of hushes and "be quiet"s followed. The little girl, who the boys now knew was Morgan, crawled under the car and hid with them behind the wheel. Crawl may be an exaggeration, though, because she was almost short enough to walk onto the tracks without bending over.

"Um, what are you doing?" Peter asked quietly. Morgan smiled at him.

"I'm going on an adventure," She said. When Peter didn't respond, she kept talking. "I asked Mommy where you were going, and she said on an adventure. I want to go on an adventure, too."

Peter looked at Harry helplessly, silently asking what they were supposed to do. Harry shrugged. *You got yourself into this mess, you can get yourself out of it.* It was too risky to send her back, since now Peter had lost count of the NKVD guard schedule. Sending Morgan away came with the risk of revealing all of them.

So, determined to follow through with his plans, Peter, Morgan, and Harry set off. Morgan stayed in the middle so that the boys could make sure she was still with them. The trio scared the first group of people they tried to talk to. The woman who had been sitting near the hole had screamed when Peter started talking, probably thinking he was a ghost.

"I'm looking for a Mary and Richard Parker," He started nervously, "Are they here?"

"No, and you three kids need to be careful," The woman answered. Peter's heart dropped. He knew that he shouldn't get his hopes up, but it was difficult not to. He wasn't sure what he would do if he didn't find either of them. It was difficult not knowing where they were, and it had only been two days.

Most of the night was spent the same way. They had to hide behind the train wheels every so often when an officer became curious or when they'd slip on the loose gravel of the train tracks. After an hour, Peter's back began to ache something fierce from being hunched over so long. He could only guess that Harry's was the same.

Morgan, surprisingly, seemed to always be in good spirits. She thought this was all some sort of big adventure. Neither Peter nor Harry had the heart to tell her otherwise. Besides not wanting to ruin her mood, they were worried she might throw a tantrum or some equally loud and attention attracting thing.

They picked up several things along the way. Adults who felt sympathetic towards them passed scraps of food through the hole while others asked about their own relatives.

"Have you seen a Mr. Andris?"

"I'm looking for an Elena Vilkas . . ."

"If you run across Mr. Stalas can you tell him . . ."

The names began to run together in Peter's mind. He shook his head each time, hating to watch their faces fall. It was possible that he had run into quite a few of them on his quest to find his parents, but it was too dark to see faces and he was getting too tired to remember names, either.

Three cars away from the end of the train, Peter didn't know what to do. He almost didn't want to see if his parents were there. Was it harder to know they weren't there or wonder if they were? *We've already come this far. . .*

Peter poked his head through the hole of the second to last car, back aching and body tired.

"I'm looking for a Mary and Richard Parker, has any—"

"Peter?" Peter was interrupted by his none other than his mother. There was some shuffling from inside the car before her face came into view. She briefly smiled at him before waving someone

else over. Peter's father appeared, a few bruises visible in the dim light. They were momentarily relieved to see their son before they realized what it meant.

"Did you come here by yourself?" His father asked nervously. Peter told him about Harry and Morgan. Mary gasped when she saw how young Morgan was. The family reunion quickly turned into a lecture.

"Why on earth would you bring a *little girl* with you on such a *dangerous* trip? Peter, and Harry, for a matter of fact, what on earth were you thinking?"

"But it's not like that—mom, she decided to come all on her own—" Peter defended. He tried to explain that she thought the whole ordeal was an adventure, and that it would have been too dangerous to send her back. Mary reluctantly accepted his explanation with a sigh.

After a few more minutes of conversation, Harry tugged on Peter's sleeve and motioned for them to leave. Peter hated to leave his parents behind, but he knew they had to leave if they wanted to make it back before the sun began to rise. Peter's parents reluctantly bid them goodbye, each slipping off their wedding bands and passing them down to Peter. Peter looked at them confused and tried to give them back.

"Take them in case something happens, sweetheart. We love you," Mary said, urging them to leave. Harry tugged on Peter's sleeve again and began to pull him down the tracks. Peter carefully tucked the rings into his pocket.

The three of them half-ran-half-crawled down the tracks until they reached their own car. Just as they were about to crawl under their car, Peter noticed words on the back of it. They were roughly painted on, the white paint as worn as the rest of the train. Peter's assumptions about the train being Soviet must have been wrong, because these words were written in Lithuanian. *vagys ir prostitutes*.

Thieves and prostitutes. Peter bristled at the thought. It was the Soviets who were thieves. In a few short days they'd stolen his home, his belongings, and his life.

With help from Mr. Stark, they made quick work of getting back inside. Morgan's mother pulled her tight and buried her face in her shoulder, muttering about how foolish she was for taking off. Mrs. Osborn was doing the same to Harry. Peter, on the other hand, had now pulled out his parents' wedding rings from his pocket and began to study them.

Holding them felt wrong. His parents should be wearing them. Instead, Peter was twirling them in his fingers, contemplating why they were given to him. *In case something happens*. What kind of something? In case his parents died? In case he never saw them again? Or in case something like what Peter saw earlier with the boy and the pocket watch?

Was that what they were worth now? Pocket watches and wedding rings?

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! I'd love to hear some feedback on what parts you liked, and the parts you didn't! Until next time <3

Chapter Three

Chapter Summary

Poor Peter Parker. That's it.

Chapter Notes

Back with another chapter! Thanks to everyone who left comments and kudos, you folks seriously make my day <3 Enjoy this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

They weren't by any stretch of the imagination. Peter observed Mr. Stark whenever he got the chance, desperately trying to figure out why he feels familiar. He hadn't thought about it much since the first day at the station, but now there wasn't much else to occupy Peter's mind.

Had he worked at the university? Would Peter have seen him as he walked the halls to his father's office to drop off something he'd forgotten that morning? Peter at least knew that they weren't neighbors, or they would have been picked up on the same truck all that time ago. Peter concluded that he'd worked at the university. It was the only way that it made sense to Peter that he would have seen him before. And right now, Peter needed something to make sense. Even if it wasn't true.

Four weeks after the train left Kaunas, it was Peter's turn to carry the buckets. He had hoped to feel the warm June (July?) sun on his face, but he'd watched dejectedly through the loose board as the sky turned a deep grey and began to pour. People had taken whatever they could to hold through the hole and catch the rainwater.

The NKVD threw open the door and angrily tossed the two buckets inside. Peter jumped up and grabbed them eagerly. He nearly fell onto the muddy ground, soil soft from hours of rain. The grass squelched with his every step. Not even ten steps away from the train, Peter was soaked. He smiled and breathed deeply.

Rain had always been his favorite. On rainy days he would curl up in the living room with a pencil and sketch book. Mary would make them both hot chocolate, Richard too, if he was home, and listen to the radio softly. The smile quickly turned to a frown. He would probably never have that again.

"Davai!" The guard yelled, spitting out a few other words Peter didn't understand. Peter had stopped walking when the memories came, standing there in the rain stupidly while everyone else was already bringing their buckets back. When Peter tried to move again, the muscles in his right leg constricted painfully and sent him sprawling into the mud.

The NKVD officer cursed. Peter made no move to get up, the pain too much. He halfheartedly

hoped the officer would shoot him, if only so that it would be over. No more pain, no more train, no more disgusting food. No more wondering why his mother left him.

Peter let the water wash over him and pretended it was carrying him down into the ground with it. A rifle poked at him, cold and wet. The guard wondered if he had simply fallen over, or if he was actually dead. It wouldn't have been the first time he'd witnessed such a thing. He turned his attention elsewhere when two people came running towards them. Peter registered the lifting of the rifle distantly, barely aware that it was no longer pointed at him.

"Ostanovka! Ostanovka!" He yelled. Quick Russian answered it, voice strained from trying to shout over the rain.

"Ne strelyayte, my pomozhem yemu!" Peter knew that voice. That was Mr. Stark. What was he doing out here?

The NVKD said something else before going quiet. Peter saw the rifle lower from his position on the ground. Soon he could see two more pairs of feet. When they talked, Peter knew who they were. It was Harry and Mr. Stark. What were they doing? Why couldn't they just let him die?

"I'll get the buckets," Harry said. Peter saw his face briefly when he bent over to get them. His hair was turning curly from the rain and Peter couldn't help but wonder how bad his own would be when it dried. His mother always tried to tame his unruly curls, but it never worked. They would always be there again by the time he got to wherever he was going.

Harry's feet disappeared from view with a squelch, and Peter wanted to laugh. What a funny noise, Peter thought. A small giggle escaped from him, and Peter temporarily forgot about the pain.

"What's so funny down there, huh?" Mr. Stark asked, voice laced with worry even though he tried to act cool.

"The ground . . ." Peter said, trailing off when a fresh wave of pain erupted in his calf. The summer rain was warm, but Peter felt impossibly cold. How long ago it seemed that Peter listened to the rain pound on his bedroom window while he wrote letters to Harley, to Aunt May and Uncle Ben. Even longer still since he'd gotten a reply. None of them responded to anything Peter had mailed them since a few weeks before they were taken. Peter subconsciously wondered where they were.

"I'm going to take you back," Mr. Stark said, gently lifting Peter from the ground. The mud and bits of grass clung hopelessly to his clothes. He would probably never get quite all of it out. A small whine escaped Peter's mouth at the prospect of going back. He hadn't thought much about it before, but the option of death was almost too tempting. A chance to end this before it really started. Like reading a book and skipping to the ending.

Peter wished the pages would flip faster, for the story to end before he could feel the dusty wooden floor of the train car under his body again. In his mind his hands flew across the pages, turning turning turning but never passing the fifteenth chapter.

Too many. There were too many blank pages waiting to be filled. Peter imagined tearing them out and stomping them into the mud.

Peter was lulled to sleep long before they reached the train, book pages fluttering like birds in his mind. He watched them fly away in his dreams, wishing they would carry him away.

Unlike the other times when Peter woke up, he was not on the bunk. He was on the floor, hair

matted with mud and tangled with grass. His head ached terribly, but for now his leg seemed to be fine. He groaned. Harry had been more correct about that cut than Peter was willing to admit. Peter realized with a pang that he could feel the familiar vibration of the rolling train, which meant that he had definitely missed lunch. There wasn't much to miss, but it was still all he had.

Peter opened his eyes slowly, thankful for once that they spent most of their time in the dark. He was sandwiched between Harry and Mr. Stark, both of them looking worse for wear. Glancing around, he noticed that most people seemed to be asleep or on their way to it. No light shined through the slats of the train. It was much later than Peter previously thought.

"Finally awake, sleepy head?" Harry joked, attempting to lighten the mood once he'd realized Peter was awake. Peter simply nodded, the simple movement amplifying the pain in his head. He was unsure of what to say. Thank you? What the hell happened? Am I dying? Do I wish I was dying?

The last one wasn't something either of them could answer, but it was still one of the dozens of questions swirling through his mind. Laying on the grass and feeling the water wash over him, Peter had wished he was dead. He had believed that dying would be easier. Dying would be a cop out.

As he had taken to doing while he was nervous, or confused, Peter pulled the wedding rings from his pocket and began to twirl them in his palm. He was thankful they hadn't fallen out. He wished he could find a chain, or maybe a rope, to tie them together and make them harder to lose. It wasn't like he could just stop at a station kiosk, though. He'd have to ask around.

"What happened earlier?" Peter asked no one in particular. The details felt fuzzy in his head. One minute he was getting water, the next he was in the mud. Then another minute, and he was waking up on a dark train.

"You fainted," Mr. Stark answered plainly. He sounded indifferent, but Peter suspected that was only a façade. "I suspect it was a mixture of the malnutrition and being generally overwhelmed."

Peter looked at him, trying to discern his expression in the dark. He couldn't see much more than the outline of the older man's face. If he were to draw it, it would only look like a shadow, or maybe even a ghost. The feeling of familiarity tugged at Peter.

"Why did you help me?" Peter wasn't sure he meant for the words to leave his mouth, but he couldn't take them back once they had. Mr. Stark shifted uncomfortably beside him.

"Because it was the right thing to do. I couldn't just leave you out in the mud to get shot and left for dead."

"What about on our first day here? There were plenty of other people who needed help then, not just me. And nobody else cared when Harry and I decided to leave the train—"

"That was just your decision," Harry interjected. Peter didn't pay much mind, hoping to answer just one of the questions he currently had.

"You decided to come with me," Peter said, somewhat indignant. It wasn't like he'd forced Harry, and definitely not Morgan, to go with him that evening. "I don't get it. There have always been people who needed more help than me. Wouldn't it be better to help them?"

"It's complicated," Was the only answer Mr. Stark gave. Peter knew he wasn't going to get any more of an explanation from him, at least not tonight. In all his observing thus far, he'd learned that Mr. Stark wasn't much for emotions or anything that resembled them.

Six days later, the train stopped again. It had been three days since the deportees were given food and water, and they began to question whether the soviets had brought them all the way here just to kill them and leave them beside the train tracks after all. It wasn't too far off from what they'd seen thus far on their journey. At the last stop, Peter watched helplessly while the NKVD shot a young girl who tried to run. They hadn't even had the courtesy to shoot her in the head, and everyone who looked out could see her bleeding out in the grass. Peter had used one of his precious stationary pages to draw her that afternoon. He didn't want to forget her. It felt like that to do so would be a sin.

The NKVD opened the doors as roughly as they always had, instructing for them to stay put until they were released. Whispers started among the adults. Released to where? Peter watched as some of the women tried to fix their hair or straighten their dresses. Even some of the better dressed men were doing the same. Peter scoffed. Anybody who would be there to see them wouldn't be impressed either way. They were all skin and bone by now. What was the point?

Quite some time later, an NKVD officer came by and ordered them to exit the car and bring their luggage. Most did so reluctantly but couldn't help but sigh when the fresh air touched their skin. The sun was warm and bright, casting the valley in a picturesque glow. Peter could almost pretend it was Lithuania, but deep down he knew it wasn't. The air smelled different here, and even the ground felt different beneath his feet.

Peter was worried that his leg might flare up in pain when he stepped on it again, but he was pleasantly surprised to find himself still standing once he'd jumped down from the car. Maybe that day had been a fluke. It must have been. What else could it be?

Mrs. Osborn pulled Harry closer against her as they walked away from the train, whispering for him to stay close. Morgan's mother did the same. Peter gripped the rings in his pocket and pretended that it was the same. Once the NKVD told them they could stop, most people sat down right away. The walk, although short, was too much for the people who hadn't been fed nearly enough or given an opportunity to stretch save for trying to climb over everyone to use the bathroom in the corner.

Peter sat near Mr. Stark. He couldn't bring himself to sit with Harry, and besides Steve, Wanda, and Pietro, he hadn't bothered to learn much about anyone else. They wanted to talk either about the lives they'd left behind (which made Peter upset) or about the futures that awaited them (which made Peter nervous). That hadn't left much for him to think about, but that was why he spent most of his time sketching in the dust.

That was what Peter decided to do now. He hadn't had proper light to draw in weeks, and without anything better to do, he pulled one of his precious pages from his suitcase along with one of his pencils. His fingers itched to draw the valley, but his mind couldn't do it. The more he studied the details, the harder it was to pretend they were still in Lithuania. Instead, Peter drew quick profiles of the people around him. He could see Steve from where he was sitting. He didn't look so grumpy now that he was in the sun, but that may have had more to do with his companion. Peter didn't know his name, but he was taller than Steve (who wasn't?) with deep brown hair and a sharp jawline.

Whoever he was, he must have been truly special if he could get Steve to look less like someone had just murdered his grandmother. After drawing Steve and his mystery companion, Peter drew the Maximoff twins. They were stretching their sore muscles, gracefully moving in time with each other. Peter wondered if it was because they were twins or because they were seriously that good.

“I didn’t know you were an artist,” Mr. Stark said eventually, leaning over to admire Peter’s work. For the first time in a while, Peter smiled.

“Yeah. I had a chance to study in Vilnius for the summer once,” Peter answered, the smile dropping. He’d forgotten about that since they’d passed Vilnius itself a few weeks back. He had only just received his acceptance letter the week before they were kidnapped, too.

“That’s impressive. What was it like?”

“I never went,” Peter sighed. He opened his suitcase and carefully put the drawings inside, squished between the books to keep them flat. Mr. Stark looked at him questioningly.

“Why?” He asked.

“Because,” Peter whispered, looking around to see if any NKVD were around, “I got deported.”

Chapter End Notes

I hope you liked this! Next chapter will be up on Thursday!

Chapter Four

Chapter Summary

Act 1 draws to a close as the Lithuanians finally reach their destination . . . spoiler alert, it's not pretty.

Chapter Notes

Hi!!!!!!! It was honestly so hard to wait to upload another chapter until today, especially after reading KitKatWinchester's comment . . . Which is why today's chapter is a little bit longer than usual. I hope you enjoy today's chapter, and come back next Monday for the beginning of Act II (which is my favorite part!!).

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

An hour after everyone sat down in the grass, trucks began to pull up. People who weren't NKVD officers emerged from them carrying papers. Peter studied them from afar, not bothering to make it look like he wasn't. Everyone was openly staring at them, curious as to who they were. It became clear who they were when the first group was chosen.

Not that far down from his own group, Peter saw one of the people pointing at one of the other groups and waving the papers. An NKVD officer nodded and took them, and not a moment later they were being yelled at to board the trucks.

The NKVD were selling them, and those people were the buyers. Peter was caught between hoping somebody chose them and feeling dread anytime someone came close like it was a schoolyard game of catch. Was it worse to stay here with the known evil, or take a chance with a different devil?

Either way, Peter figured, it didn't matter. The Lithuanians still got the short end of the stick. He thought and thought, but he couldn't find a way out. There was never a chance to run. Never a chance to escape. The only way out was going forwards, and even so, the chances were slim. They may be surrounded by valleys and open space, but Peter had never felt so claustrophobic before.

Cracks began to form in the sky, black as night. Peter's gaze darted from person to person, some laughing quietly and others conversing easily. The cracks grew, ripping apart clouds and tearing the sun in two. Peter tried to breathe deeply, but all he could feel was the weight of the sky crushing him. Nobody else seemed to notice the world falling apart.

Peter buried his head between his knees and covered his ears. The laughter and the talking and the yelling NKVD were too much— and oh god, the sky was breaking. The midnight cracks began to coalesce until there was no trace of the cerulean blue.

Falling falling falling. Pieces of broken sky fell around Peter as he tried to get his head on straight. This couldn't be real. *It couldn't be*. Suddenly, Peter wasn't on the ground anymore. He was being held up by his shirt collar, someone breathing hotly down his neck. His blood turned to ice when

he once again felt the all too familiar freezing metal against his skin.

Peter closed his eyes and waited for the bang and the subsequent pain. He waited to meet the ground face first, for his blood to soak into the dry earth. Just as before, it didn't come. Peter hated the voice in his head that told the officer to pull the trigger. How horrible it seemed to give up hope so quickly.

Harsh Russian words flew past Peter's ears, the speaker angry and rough. Peter hated Russian, no matter who was speaking it. Harry thought they should both try to learn it, maybe even from Mr. Stark, but Peter refused. They took his home, his family, and his freedom. They would not take his language.

Peter hung limp in the officer's grip. Broken pieces of the sky littered the ground around him, leaving spaces dark as the end above him. He blinked, and they were gone. The sky was whole and blue, and Peter was on the ground again.

"Don't make it a habit to draw the NKVD's attention," Mr. Stark instructed, glancing warily over Peter's shoulder. Anger flared in Peter's chest. Who was this man to give him instructions when he wouldn't even explain who he was?

"I'm not making it a habit. I never asked for their attention," Peter retorted. "It's them who's always getting involved. And you, really. If you'd just left me in the field neither of us would have to deal with this."

"You mean if I had let you die in that field?"

"Yes. I don't understand. We don't know each other, so why me? Why not Harry, why not Morgan?"

Mr. Stark closed his eyes and tipped his head back. Peter's gaze was attracted elsewhere when the group next to them was bought by a rather mean looking man dressed in furs despite the heat. Peter watched them stand up and grab their luggage reluctantly, clutching children and valuables alike to their chests as they walked. Had his parents been sold yet?

"It's complicated," Mr. Stark said finally. An NKVD guard lurked close by accompanied by another buyer. The entire group kept their heads downcast, afraid direct eye contact would encourage interaction.

"That's what you said last time," Peter complained.

"Because it's true."

When Peter looked up, he saw the buyer shake his head. The NKVD officer led him to the next group, this one looking stronger than their group. The sale was quick. Bile rose in Peter's throat as he watched it happen. Those were his neighbors. People he saw in the streets.

Why bring them all the way out here just to sell them for less than the price of getting them here? What was Stalin's plan?

The sun began to dip below the horizon, and still the NKVD did not order them back on the train. There were only two groups left. Stars dotted the twilight sky, still dim from the remaining sunlight. Peter's father had shown him the stars once when they had taken a trip out of Kaunas to visit Mary's parents. They had lived on a small farm at the time.

Peter remembered his father laying out a blanket on the damp grass and carefully pointing out each of the constellations to him and telling the stories behind them. Peter had tried to draw the night sky the next day, but he couldn't get the color of the sky right. On the paper it looked flat and nothing like Peter had wanted it to be. He hadn't gotten rid of the picture, but he had no idea where it was now.

Pulling out a jacket from his suitcase to use as a pillow, Peter lay spread-eagled on the grass. Crickets chirped peacefully, and Peter could almost pretend he was in his room. Oh how good it felt to be able to lay down properly and sleep! The grass was a dream compared to the splintery wood of the bunk, the cool breeze a breath of heaven against his skin. Peter closed his eyes gratefully and slipped into a dreamless sleep.

The next day the NKVD ordered the deportees onto trucks. Most were relieved, as the trucks were open at the back and allowed for fresh air and light. Peter still did not sit with Harry. Even thinking of him made the wedding rings weigh down his shirt pocket like lead. His parents had taught him that it was wrong to be jealous, but Peter found it awfully hard not to be. Harry and Morgan both had their mothers. Wanda and Pietro may not have had parents, but they had each other.

Peter had no one. Unless one was counting Mr. Stark, but Peter was still upset that he couldn't get a genuine answer from the man about his motives or figure out why he felt familiar. "It's complicated." Was not going to keep Peter satisfied for long.

The trucks eventually stopped in another valley. This time there was a small village; there couldn't have been more than ten buildings total. Upon closer inspection, he realized that it was not a real village. All of its inhabitants seemed to be NKVD, at least from what Peter could see. Had they built the village themselves or merely stolen it from its owners?

Peter listened to the loud shouting of the NKVD and wondered what they were talking about. It was hard to imagine them talking about normal things like what they ate for dinner or what their weekend plans are. Peter found it hard to imagine them as anything more than monsters.

"They're talking about home," Mr. Stark said absently. Peter nodded, still frustrated. He was caught between not wanting (needing) his help and being grateful that he's getting it. Peter's mind was a jumble of feelings and emotions that he could barely make sense of on the best of days.

"Oh," Peter sighed. He wanted to be angry—he truly did—but even after the night of blissful sleep on the grass, he was exhausted. Those officers knew when they were going home. There was a light at the end of the tunnel for them. For the Lithuanians, however, there were bricks and mortar blocking the exit. In fact, there was no tunnel for them at all. Only an open plain surrounded by a dark cloud. One couldn't even be sure they were nearing the exit, or if there was one.

Peter's eyes drooped shut of their own accord. He clutched his suitcase to his chest like a child with a teddy bear. To him it was one. Everything he now owned was kept in that suitcase. It was the closest he had to home anymore. And even though the wedding rings were pressed uncomfortably against his skin, Peter didn't move them. He wanted to know they were there.

Once he was sure the boy was asleep, Tony chanced a look at him. Peter looked even smaller and fragile in sleep than he did when he was awake. The boy's hair was matted with dirt from weeks on the train and from falling in the mud. His cheekbones protruded sharply from too long without proper food or water. There wasn't room for Tony to say anything, though, because he looked quite

the same. Everyone on the truck did, but none more so than the children.

Tony wished there was more that he could do for them, but it seemed his brief days as a partisan were over. All because one of their own had been messy in covering up his own tracks. Scott Lange was a fine man and a good fighter, but an information run went wrong had exposed their whole ring of fighters. Their particular group had taken to calling themselves the Avengers.

He shook his head to clear the thoughts. Dwelling on the past didn't do him much good. It certainly didn't help him deal with the present. Tony didn't know how to answer Peter's question of "*why me?*". He wished that he could ask Mary or Richard for advice. So long ago it seemed that he'd been sitting in their living room. Peter had been asleep in his own bedroom at the time.

"Where is everyone else?" Tony asked, glancing between Mary and Richard. They sat close together on the sofa opposite him and wore similar expressions. Both had a grim look in their eyes.

"This isn't about everyone else. We have something especially important to ask you," Richard answered. Mary glanced towards the hall as if she was afraid Peter was going to walk out into the living room at any moment. Tony shifted in his seat, mind trying to puzzle out what was going on. Was it a solo assignment? Something dangerous.

"What is it?"

"We think the NKVD are on to us." Mary stated plainly. Richard nodded in agreement. "But we don't think they suspect anyone else."

"Okay . . ."

The couple stayed silent for a moment, Mary glancing once again towards her son's room. Tony's nerves fluttered like butterflies. He had a feeling he knew what they were going to ask, and he already knew the answer.

"We need you to take care of Peter if something happens to us. We trust you with our lives, and we trust you with his, too. Can you do that?"

"Of course," Tony answered quickly. He'd only met Peter a handful of times during secret Avenger's meetings, but he knew that he would do anything for him. Anything for Mary and Richard's son. They'd done so much for him over the years. "Do you think they're going to arrest you soon?"

"Most likely, but it's hard to know for sure. Barnes said they're suspicious but won't act until they have more information. If they do arrest us, Peter needs to be long gone. Hopefully in America with May and Ben if we can arrange it."

"What are you going to tell him?"

"We aren't sure. The truth is too dangerous, but he's smart, Tony. He wouldn't believe any lie that we could come up with. He would know something was wrong if we up and shipped him off to another continent. But with Stalin on one side and Hitler on the other, it's too risky to let him stay here. At any rate, he can't stay in Europe."

Tony agreed. Though some Lithuanians thought Hitler would save them from the Kremlin, anyone could see that he would only cause more problems. The Soviet suppression would pale in comparison to Hitler's atrocities.

"I'll do whatever you need me to."

When Tony saw Mary and Peter at the train station, he hadn't known what to do. He'd been too caught up in thinking that he'd failed Mary and Richard by being arrested to comprehend the truth of seeing them there. Mary had caught his eye and he nodded, promising without words that he would still do it.

It had been hard to let Peter go on his little escapade, but it would have drawn more attention if he'd tried to follow. Of course, then Harry and Morgan went, but there wasn't much he could do about that either. He wasn't responsible for them. And even though they spent most of their days cooped up in relative darkness, looking after Peter still wasn't simple.

Tony's heart had broken when he first saw Peter pull the pair of wedding bands from his pocket. It didn't take a detective to figure out who's they were. Maybe Tony should have told Peter then that his parents hadn't left him alone, not quite. But the boy was clearly still shocked from the days' events (everyone was) and it didn't seem appropriate. How did one tell a child that their parents had made a deal weeks ago to ship him off to America because they were certain they were going to be arrested and killed?

Simply: you didn't. Peter had too many things on his plate to deal with this. Tony didn't want to risk another panic attack right now, especially not in a place so filled with apathetic people. The kid had had enough run ins with the NKVD to last them both a lifetime.

Back when he agreed to Mary and Richard's plan, he hadn't thought looking after Peter would be so difficult. Back then he'd thought Peter was a quiet kid who went to school and did what he was supposed to. Tony supposed he couldn't be surprised, though, because Mary and Richard weren't much different. Apple doesn't fall far from the tree and all that.

What on earth have I gotten myself into?

Two hours after the trucks pulled into the village, they left. Peter lifted his head groggily when the vehicle began to jostle. He looked around with heavy-lidded eyes, momentarily lost in the dream he'd been having. For a couple short hours, he'd been back in his apartment with his family. Ben, May, and Harley had been there, too. They'd all been sitting on the floor around the coffee table playing cards. Ben, as usual, was winning. He'd always been the best at it.

"Where are we?" Peter asked tiredly. He realized it was a stupid question as soon as it had left his mouth. No one had known where they were since they'd left Lithuania and passed into Russia. There were no maps or road signs beside the tracks.

"Somewhere in the mountains." Steve replied without a hint of sarcasm. He was sitting across from Peter and Mr. Stark. Steve looked at them curiously, his usually sarcastic demeanor muted. If Peter didn't know any better, he'd say that there was a hint of recognition between him and Mr. Stark.

"We just left the village," Steve added. Peter nodded. He just wanted this miserable journey to be over, whatever that meant. Peter knew that their destination wouldn't be the end. He was too smart to think the Russians would take them all this way and simply kill them. They must have had some ulterior motive. Hard labor, perhaps, to aid in the war effort. Or to speed along their industrialization process.

Before long, the gentle movement of the truck lulled him back to his dreams. His dreams were more memories than real dreams, these days, though. That was fine with Peter. He much preferred his memories to any nightmare his mind could dream up.

“Did you work at the university?” Peter asked, awake once more. He could see the stars twinkle from the open back of the truck and imagined what it would be like to be one of them. Floating up in the sky without a worry in the world.

“Um, no.” Mr. Stark answered quietly. Most of the other deportees had fallen asleep by now. Peter could see Harry leaning on his mother’s shoulder from the corner of his eye.

“Oh.” Peter said, shifting uncomfortably in his seat. His back ached from sitting on the wooden bench for so long. “You seemed familiar, so I thought maybe I’d seen you there. My father would bring me with him sometimes when he had lectures.”

Peter took the rings from his pocket and stared at them in the moonlight. They were dull from weeks and weeks of dirt and grime. He wondered if their owners suffered the same fate.

“You must be smart, then. Even I had trouble understanding some of the lectures there.”

“I don’t know about that.” Peter blushed, “Art is more my style.”

“Don’t sell yourself short, kid.”

A few moments passed in silence before Peter spoke again. It had been more a question to himself than to Mr. Stark, but he answered it nonetheless.

“If you didn’t work at the university, then how do I recognize you?”

“I’m a family friend of sorts,” Mr. Stark said. He chose the easy way out. It wasn’t a lie, but it wasn’t the complete truth, either. “I met your mother in Moscow. We’d both been studying abroad at the time, but we were surprised to learn we were both from Kaunas.”

“Is that why you know Russian so well?”

“Yes. We kept in touch after coming home.” *And we started a resistance group together*, is what Mr. Stark didn’t say. Peter didn’t ask anything more, choosing instead to enjoy the quiet and maybe even snag some more rest. He would need it for what awaited him at the end of this journey.

In the early morning, the truck stopped for the last time. Its passengers spilled out uncertainly, tripping over untied shoelaces and other people. Peter stuck close to Mr. Stark as the NKVD began handing papers to each other and yelling information. Harry and Mrs. Osborn were herded off into a different direction than the rest of the Lithuanians, confusion written on Harry’s face and despair on his mother’s.

Peter stayed as close to the back of the crowd as he could, hoping not to be noticed. An officer shoved a slip of paper into his hand gruffly before moving on to the next person. Peter stared at the strange letters in an attempt to read them, but it was useless. For fear of losing it, Peter shoved it deep in his pants pocket.

Once everyone was given a slip of paper, officers began to lead them towards the small buildings in the distance. Peter debated whether they could be truly called buildings or not. They looked more like huts, crudely built from scraps of wood and had roofs of straw.

Every so often, Mr. Stark looked back at Peter to ensure that he was still there. Peter felt more comfortable in the knowledge that his parents had known him, but it didn't sit right that he hadn't seen him very much. Mary and Richard had friends over almost every week for dinner parties and small get-togethers. The pieces weren't connecting in his head.

The same NKVD officer that had given Peter the slip of paper shoved him and Mr. Stark towards one of the "houses". Peter stumbled over the uneven ground but managed to regain his balance before he fell on his face. Moments later an angry looking woman dressed in furs burst through the front door and began shouting. The officer ignored her and moved on to the next building.

Mr. Stark had a quick conversation with her, none of which Peter could understand. While she still looked angry, she knew there wasn't anything she could do about the situation. With a grumble, she marched back into her house. Mr. Stark and Peter followed.

The inside wasn't much better than the outside. The floor was made of dirt with the occasional piece of scrap wood or fur. In one corner there was a wood stove as well as a small stack of split logs. In another corner was a straw pallet and a small oil lamp.

"Her name is Akulina." Mr. Stark supplied. Peter nodded, unaware of how to act. He held his suitcase timidly. He had the suspicion that if he set it down, Akulina would get angry. Peter felt terrible for taking her space when she clearly didn't want them there, but it didn't look as if either of them were going to go to the NKVD and demand a better living arrangement.

Akulina grumbled something else, but Mr. Stark didn't bother to translate it. It probably wasn't something Peter wanted to hear, anyway. He watched as Mr. Stark set his stuff down in the only free corner of the house and gestured for him to do the same. Peter followed suit reluctantly, pulling out the paper once his hands were free. He handed it to Mr. Stark and asked him to translate it.

"It says that you have to make shoes."

"What?" Peter asked. He did not know how to make shoes. Did the NKVD expect him to know how? "I don't know how to make shoes."

"I suspect you will have to learn, then."

"What's your assignment?" Peter hoped that maybe they'd have the same assignment. Mr. Stark pulled his own slip of paper from his coat pocket and read it hastily.

"It seems that I will be cutting down trees and splitting logs," He answered. Shoes and trees? What did the NKVD want with them? Was this just some elaborate punishment? Peter wanted to scream. Questions, questions, questions. Besides the measly suitcase he'd taken with him, he didn't have anything else. He didn't even have it in him to wonder about his parents anymore. He'd spent so much time wondering where they were, what they were doing, why they left him, to think about much else. But now he was exhausted. He just wanted it to all be over.

Peter stared at Mr. Stark with wide eyes. Just as he'd finally answered one of his million questions, a million more arose. Tears began to form without his permission. Mr. Stark looked at him sympathetically.

As Peter began to cry, Tony remembered one of the things Mary had told him about Peter. *He hates being babied, but sometimes all he needs is a little comfort.* Sure, Tony had said, I can do

that. But now he's standing here, and he isn't so sure that he can. He'd never been one for comfort. His parents hadn't given him much, though he could tell that sometimes his mother had wanted to. Maria was too scared of Howard to act on her impulses.

Tony shook his head to clear the thoughts gathering like storm clouds. This isn't about Maria, or Howard, and definitely not him. This is about Mary's son. This is about Peter. Tony had promised to take care of him once they were gone, and that was exactly what he would do. There was no giving up. There was no quitting.

Tony stepped forward slowly and awkwardly. Peter watched him like a deer in headlights, brown eyes full of tears. Any minute now they would surely spill over like a waterfall. Reminding himself of his promise to Mary and Richard, he quickly pulled Peter into a hug before he could regret it.

Peter stood stiffly for a moment before falling apart. He buried his head in Tony's shoulder and let the tears that had been threatening to spill over for weeks finally fall.

"I want to go home," He mumbled.

"I know," Tony said softly. He wished there was more to say, more that he *could* say, but there just wasn't. The time for empty promises had long gone. Left in its place was cold, hard truth and fear of the future.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed this chapter, I can't wait to see you all next time <3

Check me out on [Tumblr!](#)

Chapter Five

Chapter Summary

Peter has a lot of anxiety . . . and for good reason. Basically, RIP Peter Parker because I keep hurting him :(

Chapter Notes

Sorry this is later in the day than I would have liked to post it, but I was playing Sims 4 most of the day. What can I say, I like building houses . . .

I'm super excited for this part and I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it!

<3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

January 1924

“Can you point me in the direction of the university?” He asked one of the station workers. He had explicit instructions on how to get there, but part of him wanted a little bit of adventure before he was stuck studying in a dorm for the semester.

The university wasn't very far from the station, but Tony had great difficulty finding the correct building. He'd ended up in the girl's dorm by accident at one point. The girls—who were actually rather nice—laughed at him before sending him in the right direction. His new roommate, however, wasn't quite as nice. He didn't seem interested in any conversation that lasted past, “Hello.” *Oh, well.* Tony thought, *I guess I'll be less distracted when I try to study later.*

Since he didn't have much to unpack yet, Tony made it to the exchange student orientation early. A few other students sat scattered in the auditorium, most with noses shoved in books or writing letters. He scanned the room, trying to determine the best place to sit, when a girl his age asked if he wanted to sit next to her. Her short brown hair had been pulled back with a clip.

Tony agreed and sat next to her awkwardly. He'd never been particularly good with girls. Howard kept him too busy to do much outside of school and the company.

“My name is Mary,” She said easily, extending her hand. Tony shook it and introduced himself, too. Her Russian flowed much better than his did, and they soon learned they were both from Lithuania. It wasn't completely shocking; a lot of students in the Baltics did their semester abroad in Moscow. She was from the rural areas of Kaunas, and Tony lived in the middle of the capital, Vilnius.

Such opposites, in almost every way. Where Mary was outgoing, Tony was quiet. She always seemed to know what was going on while Tony always played catch up. Her Russian was flawless,

his was broken. The old saying was the opposites attracted, though. The two had multiple engineering classes together and sometimes left campus to explore the architecture. Mary even helped Tony with his Russian. He improved greatly under her instruction.

When Tony wrote home during the first month of his life in Moscow, he left Mary out. It wasn't because he was embarrassed (though maybe he did want to avoid his mother's teasing. He was twenty-two, dammit!), but because he didn't want Howard commenting on it. Howard would say Mary was an unnecessary distraction from his schoolwork. Howard would say he should stop talking to her. But Mary was a friend. One of his first, really, and he didn't want to give that up. Was that really so wrong?

Shortly after they had been forced into Akulina's shack, another officer came knocking. Or banging, really. The door creaked under the effort, and Akulina grumbled in the corner. Peter glanced between her and the door, unsure of which to be more afraid of.

A few moments passed before Tony got up to answer the door. Peter held his breath as he answered the door. On the other side stood a red-haired officer. Peter noted that her features weren't as sharp as some of the others he'd seen. One could even call her pretty.

"Tony Stark?" She asked. The words sounded wrong coming from her, like her tongue didn't quite know how to make the sounds.

"That's me," Mr. Stark answered. They began to converse quickly, and if Mr. Stark's expression was any indicator, it was not a pleasant talk. Peter sat quietly in his corner and wished he could sink into the dirt. Anything to get away from here, from this situation. Anything to not have to deal with this situation any longer.

"I have to go see the commander," Mr. Stark said, turning to face Peter. In the background, the NKVD officer yelled, "*Davai!*". Peter's stomach churned at the thought. Why would the commander want to see him? What would happen if he went? What if he didn't come back?

"No," Peter shook his head. If something happened, then he would be all alone. Maybe his motivations were selfish, but he didn't care.

"I have to. I'm not going to make you come with me, but you have to stay here. Don't move, alright?"

"No."

"*Davai,*" The guard yelled, growing impatient. Or maybe she already was impatient. It was difficult to tell, as her expression relayed nothing about her emotions or what thoughts might be swirling around in her head.

"I'll be right back, don't move," He instructed, already walking out the door. Peter looked uncertainly at the door, even though Mr. Stark was long gone. Without much else to do, he retreated to the corner of the room opposite Akulina and sat down. He pondered their situation.

They didn't know where they were, but maybe the old Russian woman did. Peter could try and convince Mr. Stark to ask her where they were if—no, when—he returned. Peter hated the nervousness—the fear—that took root in him. Him and Mr. Stark weren't even that close . . . but the idea of being left to deal with everything alone . . . it scared him. It scared him more than

anything.

Tony and the NKVD reached the commander's office after only a few minutes of walking. It was a small building and looked rather rundown on the outside. The glass windows were dirty from months of neglect. The door squealed when the officer opened it.

The inside wasn't much better. The floor was dusty, the walls several shades darker than they used to be originally. Cobwebs even gathered in some of the corners, as if nobody here knew (or cared) to use a broom.

She shoved Tony inside, though not as hard as some of the other officers might have. Many might have chalked it up to the simple fact that she was a girl, but Tony knew better. Even beneath the uniform, it was obvious that she possessed a lot of power. Just from her expression alone, he knew better than to mess with her.

"Here's the man you wanted," She said gruffly, nodding towards the man sitting behind the only desk in the room. His features were sharp and unpleasant. He could be none other than the commander.

"Thank you, Romanov," He said. The man plastered a clearly fake smile on his face before offering—ordering—Tony to sit down in the chair opposite his desk. Tony obliged, wary. Whatever the commander had called him here for, it couldn't have been good.

"Ah, Mr. Stark. I trust you find the accommodations pleasing?" The man asked mockingly. Tony played along with his antics.

"Certainly, commander. The trip here was quite comfortable as well, I dare say."

"Enough with the pleasantries. I have a job offer for you, and it's one I don't recommend you turn down. Is it true that you studied abroad in Moscow?"

"Yes," Tony answered truthfully. "I rather enjoyed the architecture. Moscow is a beautiful city."

"It is. St. Basil is a favorite vacation spot of mine, but I didn't ask you here to discuss architecture. I would like you to be my informant."

Tony stared at the commander incredulously. All the shit they'd put them through, and he expected him to work for them? Tony shook his head with a sigh.

"All due respect, sir, but I cannot."

"Are you sure? This offer comes with benefits. Extra rations, special treatment. Have I mentioned how difficult winters are up here?"

"I don't believe you have, but I still have to refuse. You must understand, sir, I cannot betray my country. I imagine you would do the same," Tony said. The commander was silent for a moment before continuing, but his next question was directed to the officer who had brought him in, Romanov.

"Perhaps he needs a little more motivation. Does he have any . . . close companions?" The commander asked. Tony physically felt his heart drop. He should have known Peter would be in danger simply by being around him, just as Mary and Richard had.

Tony watched Romanov, her face as expressionless as ever. He waited for her answer, because even if she didn't understand Lithuanian, witnessing the conversation between him and Peter earlier was enough incrimination.

"No, sir, he does not. Mr. Stark travelled alone." She answered finally. Tony did his best to keep his own shock from betraying her words. If he seemed surprised, the commander would know she was lying and send for Peter immediately.

"Really? I presume the life of an intellectual has proven a lonely one, has it not? Anyway, if you will not be working with us, I do not wish to see you any longer. Romanov, escort him back. We don't want him causing trouble do we?"

"Of course not, sir," She said. Tony took his leave quickly, Romanov on his heels. Once they were outside, and far enough away from the office to worry about anyone overhearing, Tony thanked her. She barely spared him a glance before answering.

"I do not need your thanks," She said, voice lighter than before, more far away.

"Then why did you do it?"

"Because he is a child, and children do not deserve torture." The ghost of some old memory lingered in her eyes as she answered, and Tony wondered what it was. He wondered *who* it was. "I suggest you keep your relationship quiet. If it gets back to Schmidt, I will have lied for nothing."

"We'll be careful," Tony assured her. They had made it back to the shack by now, and the atmosphere morphed into something awkward. Neither moved as they stood in front of the creaky wooden door.

"You take care of him, Stark," She said finally, turning to leave. Tony simply nodded before opening the door and heading inside.

As soon as Mr. Stark stepped through the door, Peter asked him what the commander had wanted with him. Mr. Stark tried to avoid the question—the topic of what had occurred at all—but Peter was persistent.

"They'd wanted me to inform for them," He'd answered tiredly. Peter's eyes went wide as he realized the implications of such a thing. "They offered extra rations, but I said no."

"Good," Peter said. Then added, "They were probably lying anyways."

"Yeah, kiddo, I'm sure they were."

The conversation dropped, but every so often, Peter caught Mr. Stark looking at him sadly. Defeated, even. Peter wondered what it meant but didn't want to ask. Maybe it was better that way.

The deportees woke up the next morning to the NKVD viciously banging on their doors. If they didn't open the door fast enough, it was forced open and they were pulled out of bed. Luckily, Peter and Mr. Stark were not those people. In fact, they'd both been awake when the devil came knocking. Akulina had woken them up earlier when she left for the fields—whether that was an accident or not was still undecided.

Either way, Peter was thankful for it. It meant that he was dressed and (somewhat) ready for the day when they were forced out onto the road and into a line. The word line might have been optimistic, though. Most of the Lithuanians were slumped over from anxiety and tiredness, turning the line into more of a snake.

Peter looked to his left and right, scanning for anyone he knew. Mrs. Osborn and Harry were still nowhere to be found, but when he looked further down the line, he saw Steve standing near the Maximoff twins. The twins looked like one bundle of nervous energy, shifting from left to right and back every few seconds. Steve, however, just looked angry.

Peter caught Mr. Stark glancing down at him more than once. Neither of them said anything as the NKVD simply stared at them from the other side of the road. After a few minutes, one of them stepped forward and introduced himself as Commander Schmidt. Recognition and disdain passed through Mr. Stark's eyes before he could cover his emotions.

Schmidt walked up and down the row, scanning each person briefly before moving onto the next. When Schmidt stopped in front of Peter, he couldn't help but feel that the man was trying to stare into his soul. The thought gave Peter the chills. He just wanted to go home. He wanted to sit at his desk in his bedroom and write a letter to Harley.

He wasn't even sure of what he'd say if he had the chance to write a letter now. Would he tell his cousin the truth—about the train, the buyers, the Russian woman with whom he now shared room and board—or would he spare him the guilt and tell a lie. *Everything is going great here, Harley! We spent the last few weeks on a wonderful scenic train ride, and you wouldn't believe some of the things we saw. The mountains were absolutely beautiful!*

Peter shook his head to clear away the thoughts. It was stupid, he knew, to imagine lying to his cousin. They had practically grown up together, Harley would never believe any of his lies, no matter how expertly veiled. He was too smart. He had to be. He wanted to be a doctor. With Europe at such odds, it didn't seem likely that he would be, though. He talked about enlisting when he turned eighteen almost as much as he talked about being a doctor.

"I'll meet you back here before we go to the ration line, okay?" He said. Peter nodded and felt panic rise as soon as he began to walk away. It was sharp and achingly tight in his chest. But for now, there wasn't much he could do. He walked towards his first day as a shoemaker, desperately wishing all the while that he could run instead.

Peter's hands were covered in blisters at the end of his first day. They hurt so much that he wanted to cry, but he knew he couldn't. At least not until he was alone. He didn't want anyone to think he was weaker than he already was, especially not the NKVD who would surely use it against him.

The anxiety from earlier still lingered, its talon's sharp as ever as Peter waited for Mr. Stark to show up. He waited just outside the shack, in the same spot they had been forced to stand in early that morning. The packed dirt road was quiet because most people were waiting in the ration line, or on their way there.

The longer he waited, the sharper the panic grew. What if he didn't come back? What if something happened? What if, what if, what if. Peter's mind was spiraling out of control. He didn't know what to do, or what to think. If Mr. Stark never came back, Peter would be alone. He hadn't seen Harry since him and his mother disappeared with the NKVD. And if he was alone—

"I'm sorry, I didn't think it would take so long to get back here," Mr. Stark apologized, making

Peter jump. He's missed the other man's arrival because of all the spiraling. Surprisingly, the tightness in his chest disappeared when he noticed him. Peter took a deep breath, savoring the fresh air and the feeling of finally being able to breathe deep.

"It's okay," Peter answered. He noticed that Mr. Stark's hands were even more red and blistered than his own. He wanted to ask how his first day went, but if the slumped shoulders, blistered hands, and tired eyes were anything to go by, it wasn't good. To be fair, Peter's wasn't much better. When he'd showed up at the workshop to make shoes, he thought it might not be that hard. He was wrong. He had absolutely no idea what he was doing, and all the instructions were in Russian. There were a few Altaian natives working there that took pity on Peter and tried to teach him how to make boots, but they quickly grew frustrated when he didn't understand anything they were saying.

They walked to the kitchen in silence, taking their spots at the back of the line. "Do you have your ration ticket?" Mr. Stark asked, pulling his own from his pocket. Peter nodded and pulled his out too.

The line moved slowly, but soon enough they made it to the front. The closer they got to the front, the less Mr. Stark talked to him. It was obvious to Peter that he was trying to distance himself, but he couldn't figure out why. To him, the weirdest part was that after they had gotten their measly twenty grams of bread and made it back to the shack, Mr. Stark talked to him like nothing had changed.

They shared small details from their day before tucking in for the night. It was still light out when Mr. Stark insisted they try to sleep, but Peter was too tired to try and object. He simply lay down on his makeshift bed and closed his eyes, and before he knew it, he was out.

Chapter End Notes

Do you guys like my Tony/Mary subplot? I'm not going to lie, it's one of my favorite parts, and I was considering writing a spin-off story centered around them and their semester abroad if anyone would be interested in that!

Can't wait to see you on Thursday, we're almost halfway through :)

Chapter Six

Chapter Summary

Ready to find out what happened to the Osborns?

Chapter Notes

Enjoy <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Early March 1924

Tony and Mary sat at a small table in their favorite café, *Vesna*, with their schoolwork spread out in front of them. There was an exam that week for their physics class and they both wanted to ace it. They usually got good grades in that class, but the professor had said he would grade their work more harshly this time around.

They took turns quizzing each other with homemade flashcards and rapid-fire questions. Tony stumbled over a few answers, but he felt confident after getting them correct the second time. Once they were finished (or at least pretended to be, they both had a habit of going back to the dorms and studying even *more*), they both ordered a second cup of coffee.

There were many things they were opposites about, but the opinion on coffee was not one of them. Almost every student could agree that coffee was the savior of all saviors, and anyone who said different was lying or selling something.

“Have any plans for over spring break?” Mary asked, taking a sip of her coffee. There was so much sugar and creamer in there that Tony argued it wasn’t really coffee anymore, but that was an argument they’d long since agreed to disagree on.

Tony snorted, “No. You know how things are with my father; I’m going to stay away as long as possible. Are you going anywhere?”

“I figured I’d just hang around here. See more of the city, you know?”

Mary glanced at Tony, something hidden in her expression. Tony looked at her wide eyed. Mary was incredibly close with her family, why wouldn’t she be going back for spring break? The pair stared at each other for a moment before a waiter came by asking if they wanted a refill on their drinks. Tony nodded, his cup was taken away, and the moment was broken.

The first week was difficult, to say the least. While one might have assumed making shoes was one of the easier tasks at camp, that proved to be very, very wrong. Between not knowing what he was doing and the NKVD constantly yelling at him for working too slowly, too poorly, too *anything*,

Peter felt like a sinkhole had opened up in his gut. The anxiety never left him, not even when he was asleep. Nightmares began to eat away at the little sleep Peter managed to get each night. Some nights he woke up thinking he was still on the train until he'd open his eyes and see Akulina on the other side of the room instead of Harry next to him on the bunk.

Harry. Peter hadn't seen him since the day they'd arrived at the village, him and his mother heading in a different direction than the rest of the group. Aside from the Maximoff twins and Mr. Stark, Harry was the only person he'd talked to on the long journey here. Did the NKVD ship them off somewhere else, or worse, kill them?

Besides missing friends and grumpy NKVD officers to contend with, it seemed that every part of Peter's body hurt. His hands had blisters, his back ached from hunching over a workbench all day, and just about everything else hurt for some reason or another. After weeks of barely moving, aside from switching from sitting down to laying down, the sudden physical activity was taking its toll on everyone. Even with the uncomfortable sleeping arrangement, Peter and Mr. Stark often found themselves asleep as soon as they sat down.

The schedule didn't leave much time for talking, except when they were waiting in the ration line. Peter noticed that Mr. Stark was always nervous in the ration line and often avoided making eye contact with him. This was unusual to Peter. Thus far, he'd been the strong one. The one who knew what to do. Not the one fidgeting in bread lines and falling asleep before Peter could get a word in.

It was shocking, at least. So instead, Peter stayed quiet. He hated to impose, and he didn't want to make Mr. Stark feel guilty. He had to take care of himself, too. Not just some teenager whose parents he knew. He had the more difficult job of the two, also.

If Peter thought making shoes all day was bad, he couldn't—or didn't want to—fathom how bad being in the forests all day had been. He'd heard rumors that the NKVD officers in the woods were always the grumpiest, and the harshest. One of the worst he'd heard so far was about a group of girls the NKVD had forced to dig a hole six feet deep, and then told them to get in it. Peter listened aptly while the people in the ration line behind him discussed it. He didn't have much else to do; Mr. Stark still mostly ignored him when they were out and about. Peter wanted to ask about it, but there never seemed to be an appropriate time.

Also during the first week, the deportees had learned where they'd been taken; the Altai Mountains. There were some other villages nearby, but no way for the deportees to access them. Commander Schmidt had made it clear, without any uncertain terms, that anyone who tried to leave would be shot. Officers patrolled the road in and out of town, and when they were especially paranoid, the edges of the forest. Even though the Lithuanians far outnumbered the Russians, their fate appeared sealed.

During the third week of work, people who had been working in the fields began to steal food and pass it along to the others. It was rather easy to sneak food so long as the guards weren't paying attention. At this point, everyone's once-fitting clothes were now two sizes too big, which made hiding potatoes and beets in their pockets simple.

Wanda and Pietro, two of the field workers, seemed to be the best at it. They could pocket more than anyone else without the guards ever suspecting them of stealing, and they passed the food on to everyone they could. The Maximoff twins practically became legends among the Lithuanians.

Peter was walking back to the shack to meet Mr. Stark when they waved at him from the shadows. They were hidden behind another one of the houses, arms and clothes covered in dirt from being in

the fields. Peter glanced around to make sure nobody was watching before he slipped to the back of the house.

“We didn’t get as much today, but here’s three potatoes. Can you take one of them to Steve? One of the NKVD almost caught Pietro going there the other day,” Wanda said, pulling the potatoes from deep in her pockets and handing them over. Peter nodded.

Wanda told him which house was Steve’s, and then the secret meeting was over almost as fast as it had started. Peter briefly worried about whether he should go back to the shack and wait for Mr. Stark first, but he decided to just do it now. Mr. Stark usually wasn’t back for another ten minutes anyway, and that should be plenty of time for him to bring the food to Steve.

The walk to Steve’s was short and quiet, as things often were at this time of day. People were getting their bread rations, or already turning in for the night. Peter knocked on Steve’s door lightly and glanced around. He didn’t see any NKVD, but that didn’t mean that there weren’t any around. Some of them had a penchant for hiding in plain sight.

“What do you want?” Steve said grumpily when he opened the door. Peter asked if he could come inside, not wanting to pass things out in the open. If he was caught, they’d look for whoever was stealing from the field, and Peter didn’t want to get the Maximoffs in trouble. It would be a pretty shitty way to repay them, if nothing else.

“Wanda and Pietro sent me,” Peter offered in the way of explanation once Steve had let him in. Steve simply nodded and took the potato gratefully. Peter turned to leave, but Steve placed a hand on his shoulder, effectively stopping him.

“How is Tony holding up?” He asked. Peter was surprised to see real concern in the man’s eyes. He didn’t even know that the two had known each other.

“Oh, he’s doing fine,” Peter answered, but the words felt like a lie. He didn’t know how Mr. Stark was really doing because he never told him anything. “Fine” was the answer he gave when Peter asked how he was doing. Nothing more, nothing less.

“Okay. And tell the twins thank you for me, alright?”

“Of course,” Peter said. He left Steve’s and made his way back to where him and Mr. Stark were staying (because it could never be called home), wondering the whole time how Mr. Stark was really doing. He had thought about it absently from time to time, but he’d never truly *thought* how the older man was doing. Was he really fine? Would he really tell Peter if he wasn’t? Peter severely doubted it.

Peter was woken in the dead of night by a loud knocking on the door. Confused, he looked at Mr. Stark who shook his head at him. Akulina remained blissfully asleep on her cot.

“The commander demands everyone report to his office at once,” The knocker said. The two scrambled up, wanting to avoid any harsher treatment than was strictly necessary. They left immediately, not even needing to grab their coats. The nights had grown colder in the past weeks, and they usually had to sleep with them on to stave off exposure.

“What do you think they want?” Peter asked Mr. Stark as they fell in line with the other Lithuanians headed for the commander’s office. It was dark outside, the moon hardly a sliver in the sky above them. The people in front of them tripped on the uneven road.

“I don’t know. They may not want anything at all.” Mr. Stark answered. Peter shivered despite his layers. Mr. Stark shrugged off his coat and offered it to Peter, but Peter insisted he felt warm. Even though temperatures had dipped the last two days, he hardly felt the cold. He assumed that he’d just started to grow numb to it.

“Why would they make us get up if they didn’t want anything?”

“To prove that they hold all the power,” Mr. Stark didn’t sugar coat his answer, feeling that Peter deserved the truth. There was no point in lying to him about it, nothing to gain from it. Leaving him in the dark wasn’t going to make him worry any less.

Peter shivered again, but this time Mr. Stark didn’t say anything. The pair stayed mostly quiet for the remainder of the short walk. Other people jostled against them, almost like a reminder that they weren’t alone in this hellhole. Peter’s anxiety soared the closer they got, even with Mr. Stark beside him.

Once they reached their destination, the NKVD forced them all into the small building and ordered them to sit on the floor in rows facing the door. Peter ended up behind the Maximoff twins, the pair of whom he’d come to know ever since they’d started asking him to help pass the stolen food around.

The rows of deportees looked around nervously. Four NKVD were standing around the room, though they weren’t holding rifles. It was worse, somehow, that even in a room where they were far outnumbered, they didn’t need them to keep people in check.

Moments later, the commander stepped in. He was dressed in his uniform, looking more well rested than anyone else in the room. He paced between the rows, stepping on wayward fingers as he went. Peter had the good fortune to move his hands when the commander came down his row.

Mr. Stark, who was sitting right behind Peter, used every ounce of his self-control not to glare at the commander. Officer Romanov was in the corner watching him like a hawk, and her words echoed in the silence. *You take care of him, Stark.*

I’m trying, he thought to himself. But I’m so out of my element, *I don’t know what to do*. Should he have made Peter take the coat earlier anyway? He probably lied about not being cold because he felt guilty . . . Tony might have caught it if he wasn’t so tired. *I don’t know what I’m doing*.

The commander took his place at the front of the room and smiled coldly. He was on a power trip, and clearly enjoying it.

“Most of you are probably wondering what you are doing here tonight.” He started, staring down at the Lithuanians with clear disgust on his sharp features. “You have all been sentenced to twenty-five years of hard labor by the Soviet government after being found guilty of high crimes and treason against the state.”

Peter’s insides twisted into a knot. High crimes and treason against the state? He was a high school student, not a criminal. Sure, there had been partisan groups back home, like the Lithuanian Freedom Fighters, but he’d never even set foot in one of their meetings, let alone participated in one.

“You must sign your name to this form to accept and formally begin your sentence,” Commander Schmidt continued, motioning for one of the NKVD to begin passing around a clipboard. The first person to whom it had been handed to spoke up.

“And what if we don’t sign it? What happens then?” He said daringly. Peter recognized him, albeit vaguely, from the day in the field. With dark brunette hair and a scruffy jaw, he was the one who had been sitting with Steve. His features were hollower now, and his skin had taken on a dull pallor. Peter hadn’t looked in a mirror recently, but he couldn’t imagine that he looked much better.

“Then you come here every night until you do. Anyone who signs will also be allowed to travel to the small village near here, so long as it does not conflict with your work.” Schmidt answered. The brunette passed the clipboard to the person behind him without even picking up the pen. Many of the others did the same until the form made its way into Peter’s lap. He stared at it vehemently. He could hear his parents’ voices in his head telling him not to sign it, not to give in. Telling him that he had to stay strong. The other voice in his mind whispered for him to pick up the pen.

If he signed it, he wouldn’t have to come back here every night. He could go to the village . . . there might be someone there who could pass on a message. It would be a long shot, but Peter was willing to try anything. *It was so much easier to just do it . . . You’re stuck here either way, so what does it matter whether you sign or not?*

There was the whisper, trying to coax Peter into putting down his name. No, Peter thought back. He passed the clipboard behind him, nearly throwing it backwards in his haste to be rid of the temptation. His heart thudded painfully in his chest and bile rose in his throat. He’d been so close, oh so close, to signing his name. And for what? A shot in the dark?

Mr. Stark was right. This was just a display of power, a fear tactic, and Peter had nearly fallen for it. The realization sent Peter’s mind reeling. He felt lost. Completely and utterly *lost*. He didn’t know what he was doing, or what he was going to do anymore. The world had been so simple to him before. His world was homework assignments and trips to the museum with his best friend. His world had been portraits and family dinners. His world had been simple, pleasant.

This new world was nothing like that. This new world was pain and hunger, tiredness and cold. This new world was harsh and unforgiving. And suddenly, Peter realized why the NKVD hadn’t needed their rifles. It wasn’t because they were physically weak. It was because they’d gotten inside their heads. They’d found a way to control the narrative from the inside.

And that was worse—oh so much worse—than anything else Peter could have dreamed up.

Peter had been too shaken to pay attention to much else while they were stuck at the office. At sunrise, the NKVD told them that it was time to get back to work. Peter dragged his feet through the dirt on their way back to the shack, tripping intermittently on the bumpy road. Mr. Stark, while clearly not perfect, didn’t seem to be in as bad of shape as Peter was. When Peter asked, Mr. Stark simply claimed that he was used to sleepless nights. As per usual when they parted ways, Peter’s anxiety reared its ugly head.

For once, Peter was thankful that he worked making shoes. His hands still ached and were covered in oozing blisters, but he wouldn’t have to worry about staying upright all day. The hot air that had become a blessing on the colder days, however, was not good. On top of making him even more exhausted, Peter started to sweat underneath all his layers. It didn’t matter how many he shed, he was still too hot. And despite the warmth, he still found himself shivering.

Peter let his mind wander, as he often did, while he was working. He realized that last night was the first time he’d thought about his parents in weeks. Guilt and shame burned deep within him, churning his stomach. He’d carried the rings with him ever since they got here and even still, he’d forgotten. For five weeks he’d forgotten about his own parents. *What kind of person does*

something like that? What kind of person forgets their own parents?

“ty dolzhen rabotat!” Shouted one of the NKVD officers who were always standing nearby. Peter hadn’t even realized that he’d stopped working, but he quickly snapped back into place. There were only so many things he could deal with in one day, and right now his plate was full.

Did his parents think about him, wherever they were? Or had they fallen victim to distraction as Peter had? These were the questions that whirled through Peter’s mind until the end of the workday, and even as he walked back to the shack with his ration ticket clutched tightly in his fist. It was windy out that evening, and Peter was terrified that it might blow away.

When he got to the shack, Wanda and Pietro were hiding just inside the door. He jumped at the sight of them, as skittish as an alley cat. He muttered a curse, and Pietro laughed. It wasn’t like it used to be, more downtrodden and sadder, now, but it took away some of the tension in Peter’s shoulders.

“We didn’t mean to scare you,” Pietro said, passing over the usual three potatoes. Peter assured them it was alright, and then they left. He pocketed one and hid the other two in his suitcase for when he and Mr. Stark got back. Mr. Stark seemed to trust Akulina, but Peter still didn’t feel comfortable around her.

The walk to Steve’s was short as usual, and Peter blended in with the crowd going towards the ration line. There weren’t as many NKVD out today, most opting to stay out of the chilly wind. Peter slipped into the shack where Steve was staying without being seen easily. He’d gotten better at it recently. Steve was where he usually was; propped up in the corner. He’d gotten worse over the past few days, and some suspected that he was getting sick. Steve himself wasn’t surprised; he’d always been sickly, and it only got worse in the colder months.

The exchange happened wordlessly, pleasantries abandoned. The whole goal was to not be suspicious and hanging around tended to look suspicious. Especially when the two seemingly had no connection. They wouldn’t know each other from working together—Steve worked cleaning the NKVD barracks and offices—and they had no ties to each other back home.

A thought popped into Peter’s head just as he opened the door. Would Steve have heard anything about Peter’s parents? Maybe he would have seen a file while polishing a desk or heard a conversation while sweeping the floor. It was a long shot to think they’d have records of them here, but maybe it wasn’t. Peter was here after all, maybe this is where his parents were *supposed* to be.

“Hey, Steve,” Peter said, closing the door again. Steve raised his eyebrows in question. “Do you happen to know anything about Mary and Richard Parker? I know it’s a long shot, but you work in the offices and I thought maybe you’d have seen something.”

Steve’s expression betrayed nothing, though if it was because he knew nothing or was pretending to know nothing, Peter couldn’t be sure.

“You’re barking up the wrong tree, Peter,” Steve warned. Peter was intrigued. “You should let this go.”

“I can’t just let it go, they’re my parents,” Peter argued.

“Trust me, its better if you do.”

“How?”

“It just is.”

“But—”

“I said drop it, Peter. You’re going to get yourself into a lot of trouble poking around. It’s better for everyone if you don’t.”

“How? I need to find th—”

“Don’t be stupid,” Steve interrupted. Peter frowned at him, anger bubbling its way to the surface. Tears would surely follow.

“I’m not being stupid. I wouldn’t expect you to understand, because you have someone! The brunette, whoever he is, you have him! I don’t have anyone!”

“You have Tony! And the Osborn kid!”

“I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but Harry is gone! Mr. Stark may as well be, for how much he’ll talk to me! I don’t . . . I don’t have someone like you do,” Peter said, voice breaking at the end. Steve shook his head.

“Harry isn’t gone. I see him every day. Him and his mother stay in the NKVD barracks.”

“What?” Peter asked, a million emotions flashing through his head. Had the NKVD asked them to report on people like they had to Mr. Stark? *Had they accepted?* They must have if they were there. Anger flooded through Peter’s body. How *could* he?

“They work for the NKVD,” Steve explained. Peter took a deep breath and left without another word. He couldn’t believe that Harry would do such a thing, especially after the Soviets had killed his father. The word traitor floated to the front of Peter’s mind, and he thought of last night in the commander’s office.

They were traitors. *They were traitors.*

Chapter End Notes

I hope you liked this installment, and I can't wait to see you next Monday!

Chapter Seven

Chapter Summary

I wish I could stop hurting Peter Parker . . . but not today ;)

Chapter Notes

Sorry this posting late in the day thing is becoming a habit, but to be completely honest, my ps4 vr arrived today and I was playing the iron man game. Can you blame me for wanting to be tony stark?

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Late March 1924

It was late in St. Petersburg. Spring had barely begun to show itself and the weather was cold, but Tony and Mary stayed out anyway. Tony had used his monthly stipend from his father to buy them train tickets to St. Petersburg for spring break. It was their first trip outside of Moscow, aside from the trips the school sent them on to show off the country.

Tony walked with his hands shoved deep in the pockets of his expensive coat, having given his gloves to Mary earlier in the day. She'd accidentally left hers on the train earlier in the week, and Maria Stark had raised a gentleman. Mary was close by his side, practically bumping into him with every step.

The air was charged, and had been for a while, but the two elected to ignore it in favor of strolling down the sidewalk. The streetlamps lit their path dimly, though just enough to prevent them from tripping on the uneven bricks. The whole scene felt surreal. Like it couldn't be happening, and especially not to them.

Eventually they stopped to take a break and sat on one of the many benches that lined the streets. The cool metal wasn't exactly comfortable, but it was tolerable. Mary leaned her head on Tony's shoulder and smiled.

"This is better than going home, isn't it?" She asked. Tony hummed in response. Something had changed between them that week. The easiness they shared was still there, but there was something more to it. Something softer. Something sweeter.

Tony glanced down at where her head rested on his shoulder, determined to find out what this new feeling was. It was different than how he'd felt around his few other friends. Something fluttered in his chest, and if he didn't know better, he'd say it was nerves. But that was odd. He was never nervous around Mary. He'd never had a reason to be.

Mary, sensing Tony's eyes on her, lifted her head to see him. The evening glow of the city reflected perfectly in her hazel eyes, and the nervousness disappeared. He leaned in, and Mary did the same. Their lips met, and Tony felt a warmth spread through his body that he hadn't even known it was possible to feel.

In another life, they would have stayed together. In a life where Tony had more of his life together and Mary had less, they might have even been happy.

Tony was waiting for Peter at the shack. The kid was usually there by the time he made it back from the forest, and it worried him to find the place empty. He thought maybe there'd been a hold-up, but that gave him no comfort. Hold-ups weren't normal, and they certainly weren't good.

Just as Tony's imagination began to run amuck, the door swung open forcefully and Peter barreled through it. Anger was evident in his features and the way he held himself. It was a look Tony wasn't familiar with. And as much as he tried to hide it, he could see tears that threatened to spill over.

"What happened?" Tony asked, concerned. He quickly strode over to where Peter was standing in the middle of the room and began to check him over for any injuries. Other than Romanov, he didn't trust anyone here not to hurt a child.

"He's working for them!" Peter spat, breathing heavy. He looked everywhere but at Tony. "Harry is working for them!"

"For who? The NKVD?"

"Yes! I talked to Steve not five minutes ago, and he said that he sees them there every day. Which explains why I never see him anymore, but I just don't get it, Mr. Stark. I know we didn't know each other super well, but it just doesn't make any sense."

"Well, there might be more to it than we know right now—" Tony started, placing a comforting hand on Peter's shoulder. Peter looked down at the floor and kicked at some of the loose dirt with his foot. "—it's possible that he doesn't want to do that. They might have forced him into doing it."

"No—its just—" Peter couldn't seem to force the words out. He looked up, finally looking Tony in the eye. Tears streamed down his face, cutting trails in the dirt and grime. "Why does nobody stay?"

Tony's heart broke for this teenager—this child—and he didn't know what to do. He stayed quiet, trying to find the right words when Peter spoke again.

"First it was Harley, then mom and dad, and Harry, and next its going to be you and then I won't have anyone left. I'll be completely alone and I—I won't know what to do then."

"Oh, Peter," Tony said softly. "I know it hurts, but your parents had to leave. They were protecting you. I didn't want to tell you this yet, but I think I might have been wrong not to. Your parents . . . they were involved in a lot of things the Russians didn't like. And, um, they knew they were going to get arrested, they just didn't know when."

Tony paused to take a deep breath before continuing, watching as Peter absorbed the information. "They asked me to take care of you, if—when—it happened. Everything went to shit, you were never supposed to end up here. But you need to know that they love you, Peter. So, so much.

"And I can't speak for anyone else right now, but I'm not leaving you. I'm here for you, Peter, and I'm not going anywhere."

"You don't know that."

“I do know that.”

“Then why have you been pulling away ever since we got here?” Peter asked. “I might be younger, but I’m not naïve and I’m not stupid. You hardly ever speak to me when we’re out, or when we’re here, and I don’t even know how you really are! Last week when I went to bring food to Steve—”

Wait, Peter had been bringing food to Steve? Since when?

“—And he asked me how you were doing, and I didn’t even know what to tell him. You’re supposedly the only person I have left here, and you won’t even be honest with me. I never know how you feel, or what you’re thinking. You can’t say that you’re here for me and then never let me in!”

“I—” Tony said, cutting himself off. Peter was right. Tony didn’t know what to do. Romanov was right, too. He had to distance himself if he didn’t want Schmidt to use Peter against him, there wasn’t a way around that right now, not when the NKVD wanted him to work for them.

There was intricate balance that had to be struck, and despite all his genius, Tony didn’t know where that was. He was so far out of his league that it wasn’t funny anymore. He’d promised Mary and Richard, promised them, that he’d take care of their son and he couldn’t help but feel that he was failing. Peter was falling apart at the seams, nothing holding him together but a few wayward threads. Tony was the only one capable of picking up the needle, but he didn’t know how to use it.

“I’m sorry. I don’t—I don’t know what I’m doing.” Tony admitted tiredly. Peter stared at him wide eyed. He was going to tell the full truth. Peter deserved nothing less. “The NKVD threatened to use you against me, and I couldn’t let that happen. So Romanov—the NKVD officer who came to get me the first night—told me I couldn’t let anyone know that I was supposed to watch over you.”

“How do you know she wasn’t lying? Not just trying to get inside your head?”

Tony thought back to that night, and the ghosts that lingered in her eyes. He didn’t know who or what they were, and he probably didn’t want to know. “Sometimes you just know that you have to trust someone, even when it isn’t easy.”

“

So, you trust her?”

Tony nodded. And then he pulled Peter into a hug, their first since the day they’d arrived. Tony Stark didn’t often make promises, but that night he made another. *I’m going to be better for you, kid. I swear it.*

That night, Peter managed to get a full hour and a half of sleep before the NKVD arrived. But this time, him and Mr. Stark were at the end of the line. A light breeze was blowing, ruffling their jackets. Peter was exhausted from the emotional toll of the day, and Mr. Stark didn’t look much better. Upon a closer look, Peter noticed the dark circles under his eyes. He suspected that it had been much longer than just one night that the man hadn’t slept, despite him always seemingly passing out first.

Peter could barely stand the heat inside the commander’s office. Between all the people and the raging fire in the fireplace, he could barely keep his eyes open. His hands hurt, his joints hurt, his head hurt—everything just *hurt*. He desperately wanted to slip into a dreamless sleep. No trains, no memories, and no pain.

Peter looked around the room, trying to find something to focus on while they waited to leave. The

clipboard had already gone around the room and he'd passed it on without a second thought this time around. The others had done the same.

Eventually, Peter's eyes landed on a portrait of Stalin that hung just above the fireplace. They'd learned a bit about him in school after the Soviets annexed Lithuania, but Peter hadn't bothered to remember any of the history after they'd taken the test. It didn't really matter, anyway, he supposed. There weren't any more grades or tests in his future.

The portrait was striking, all sharp angles and straight lines. Stalin had been painted in his military uniform. The golden buttons and medals glittered like they were real. Peter, while he hated the subject, couldn't help but admire the work. He'd never worked much with oils, preferring to draw or use watercolors. He'd always thought he might like to try it someday, though.

Peter was distracted from the portrait when he heard someone whispering to his left. The NKVD were paying little attention to them, as bored with watching the Lithuanians as they were with sitting there. He chanced a look and saw that it was the little girl, Morgan, who was talking.

"Do you think we'll ever get to leave?" She asked. She was bundled in a coat that was much too large for her, the sleeves rolled up just enough to show her hands. There was a doll in her lap. It was scruffy and looked to be covered in dirt, but some of its blonde hair could be seen through the muck.

"Of course I do, sweetie," The mother answered, lying through her teeth. "But now we must be quiet."

"Liale doesn't think we will. She says that they'll never let us go home." Peter wondered who Liale was. He hadn't heard about anyone in the village named Liale, but it was possible that they'd just never met before.

"Liale must be wrong," The mother looked at her daughter sadly, but Morgan didn't see. She picked up the doll and pulled it close to her chest.

"Liale is never wrong," Morgan said it like it was a fact, and perhaps to a child lost in fantasy, it was. Liale, whoever she was, couldn't possibly know what the Soviets were going to do with them. Quite honestly, there were times Peter wondered if the Soviets even knew what they were going to do with them.

"Where do you think he is?" Wanda said to Pietro, voice hushed. The dirt path they called a road was crawling with NKVD today, making their distribution practices more difficult. As the pair had lost more and more weight, the potatoes began to stick out in their pockets. They'd had to become even sneakier and creative to get the food out of the fields. There had almost been a run in with a redheaded guard, but she turned a blind eye.

"I don't know. Maybe they're making him work late?" Pietro suggested. Wanda shook her head, peering around the corner of the shack. The road was busy with other Lithuanians and NKVD, but no sign of Peter.

"They're just as glad to be rid of us as we are of them. They see us as nothing more than pigs, why would they keep him late?"

"Things change. I can never tell what's going on inside their heads."

"Me neither," Wanda said, "And it bothers me." She had always been good at reading people.

Figuring out their feelings and thoughts was almost a puzzle to her, and there had never been one she couldn't crack until arriving in the little Altai village where they now took residence.

"Can we just leave the food in their shack? He should know what to do with it," Pietro suggested. Wanda nodded. They had other people to help, anyway, and they had to make it to the ration line before it got too late. They crept into the shack and left the potatoes on top of Peter's suitcase.

The twins were worried, but there was more to worry about than just a missing friend. They left, scanning every face they passed. Peter was nowhere to be found.

Tony was making his way back from the forest when he saw Wanda and Pietro heading towards the ration line. They whispered back and forth, heads darting around wildly. He hadn't talked to them much, but he knew that Peter saw them every day. Wanda's eyes lit up when she saw him. She rushed over, Pietro not far behind.

"Have you seen Peter?" She asked. Tony shook his head, confused. Peter never had a reason to be out this far. "He never met us at the usual spot. We waited but he never showed up."

"How long ago did you leave?" Tony said, a pit opening in his gut. He was trying, he really was, but sometimes he thought he'd drop dead from a heart attack because of that kid. Tony only hoped that he hadn't gone and done something risky. Emotions were running higher than usual as the holiday season approached, and there were an infinite number of triggers that could set anyone off.

"Six minutes ago, give or take. He might be there now. It could have just been a fluke."

"Maybe it is just a fluke, but there's a chance that it isn't," Tony replied. He thanked the twins and left at a brisk pace. There was always the chance that something was a fluke, but the aching feeling in Tony's chest told him it was more than that. Peter was impulsive, even reckless, sometimes. He could have very well gotten himself into a situation that he wasn't equipped to get out of, and then

No, stop thinking like that. Don't lose it before you figure out what's really going on. It might just be nothing. The little voice in the back of Tony's mind said. It sounded suspiciously like Jarvis, the man who used to take care of him when he was younger. Jarvis had always been better at these sorts of situations than Howard had been. Tony selfishly wished the man was here. He'd never wish his situation on his worst enemy (except maybe the NKVD themselves), but he could have used the help.

Tony rushed back to the shack as quickly as he could without being suspicious. It was difficult with all the increased NKVD activity, but he managed. He forced himself to take a deep breath before opening the door, steeling himself for the possibility that Peter might not be there.

"Oh thank god," Tony breathed upon seeing Peter in his usual corner. The relief only lasted a moment before he realized that Peter was asleep and Akulina was kneeling over him with a wet cloth. Akulina looked at Tony like a deer caught in headlights. The two had spoken some over the past couple of months, but they weren't on the best of terms.

"Some of my friends brought him here," She explained softly, "They make shoes, too, and they told me that he practically passed out at the table. I think he has a fever."

"Only a fever? Are we sure that is isn't part of something worse?"

Akulina shook her head wearily. "He only got here a few minutes ago. He was awake when they

carried him in, though. He seemed scared and kept asking for you. I didn't want to do anything that might frighten him more."

Tony looked down at Peter sadly. Even in sleep the boy looked pained, his eyes twisted shut mouth turned in a frown. He didn't know how to help. He barely knew where to begin. He'd studied some medical, of course, but that was always Bruce's thing when they were in the Avengers together.

Sensing the confusion swirling through his head, Akulina explained that they should check to make sure he didn't have any unexplained bruises or rashes. She said that those would be signs of scurvy, and if it was, they needed to act before it progressed any further. The only way to do that would be to remove Peter's coat and other clothes to make sure, and Tony was afraid he might freeze to death if they did that.

"I've got some firewood stashed in the tree line about twenty meters back. We can use that to keep it warmer in here while we figure out what we're dealing with, and then you need to go get your rations." Akulina instructed. She handed him Peter's ration ticket from the kid's pocket and sent him on his way. Tony did as he was told as fast as he could, hating to leave Peter behind. If the kid had been asking for him, it felt wrong to leave him in the hands of a stranger.

Soon enough, Tony slipped back through the makeshift door. The stove had been lit in the corner, and Peter had been moved closer to it. He now rested on Akulina's cot, which she had dragged across the room. When Tony walked closer, he could see purple and blue bruises peppering the kid's arms and chest. There were red spots, too, and Akulina didn't have to speak to know what was going on.

"So what do we do now?" Tony remembered studying scurvy when he was still in school, but mostly as a side-effect of wartime rations on soldiers. It was caused by vitamin c deficiency and symptoms included fever, exhaustion, and irritability. The only way to truly cure it was to fix the root issue: vitamin c.

"I have some potatoes we can give him when he wakes up, but other than that all we can do is ease his discomfort."

All we can do. . . No, that couldn't be it. There had to be some other solution to the equation. There must have been somewhere they could get more food. *Romanov.*

Tony muttered a quick goodbye to Akulina before rushing out the door. Peter stirred on the cot, a small groan escaping his lips. Tony's heart twanged, but he had to leave. The NKVD wouldn't be patrolling much longer. If he didn't catch Romanov before she went inside, he wouldn't have a chance to talk to her again until tomorrow.

Luckily, Tony found her at her usual post at the end of the dirt road. She held her rifle in hand, but the safety was on and her fingers were nowhere near the trigger. Almost like she could sense him approaching, she addressed him before he had the chance to speak.

"I saw him today," She said, voice rougher than usual. "I saw some of the villagers carrying him back to the shack."

She stared straight ahead, avoiding Tony's eyes. Tony let her do it. He could only handle so many ghosts at a time.

"He's sick. Akulina believes its scurvy. I'm sure you know what that is."

“I’ll do what I can, but I can't make promises to you. Giving false hope is a dangerous game, and I prefer not to play it.”

“I understand.” Tony said. He didn’t know much, but he knew enough to believe that she would come through for him. *Sometimes you just know that you have to trust someone, even when it isn’t easy.*

Chapter End Notes

I can't wait to see you all Thursday!

Chapter Eight

Chapter Summary

Peter can't get it into his head that he doesn't have to do this alone.

Chapter Notes

Hi. I don't have an excuse for being late this time. I just feel like shit, but I hope you enjoy!

Peter woke up sometime in the middle of the night, but not for long. The first thing he saw was Akulina, hovering over him with a wet cloth. He couldn't help but sigh when she placed it across his forehead. He was warm, too warm, and the relief was sweet.

"Don't worry, honey, he will be back soon," She assured him, smoothing back his unruly curls gently. Peter was shocked to discover that he could understand her before realizing that she'd spoken in Lithuanian. The vowels sounded wrong, and words awkward, but she'd tried.

Peter opened his mouth to reply, but the words didn't come. His mouth tasted like metal and hurt so bad he wanted to cry. All that came out was a pitiful whimper.

A few minutes later a chill blew through the room, and Peter heard Mr. Stark before he saw him.

"It should be easier to get more wood next time, it seems the NKVD have finally gone to bed." He said. And then, "He's awake?"

Mr. Stark and Akulina traded words that Peter couldn't understand, and then Mr. Stark was at his side. Peter didn't understand what was happening. One minute he was making boots, and the next he was with Akulina.

Peter watched through blurry eyes as Akulina added more sticks to the stove. Mr. Stark removed the cloth from his forehead—for now it had grown warm—and Peter instantly missed it. He shivered, but his body felt like it was on fire. And everything hurt. Oh, did everything *hurt*.

"Do you think you can sit up for me, kid? You need to eat," Mr. Stark said. Peter shook his head, sending a wave of pain through his skull. He closed his eyes to try and block everything out, but a few tears leaked out anyway. Peter felt a calloused hand gently wipe them away and he unconsciously leaned into the contact. The hand froze for a minute at the contact before moving to card through Peter's hair comfortingly.

Peter was easily lulled to sleep, only catching faint whispers of a conversation before he slipped into a dream. As his dreams often seemed to be these days, this one was a memory.

Peter sat at the dining room table with his parents. May, Ben, and Harley were there too. It was the last dinner the family had had together before Harley stopped returning Peter's letters. Dinner

had long been cleared away, but nobody had moved to the living room yet. Peter and Harley were playing Karas—a version of War—while the adults talked in hushed tones.

“How are you so good at this?” Harley asked, surrendering his last card to Peter. Peter laughed as he reshuffled the deck.

“Either skill or sheer dumb luck, I haven’t quite figured it out yet,” He’d said. Peter and Harley glanced at their parents, wondering why they were being so secretive. When Harley had mentioned it, their parents brushed them off by saying, “It’s not anything you have to worry about, sweetheart.”

Natasha walked silently through the shadows, clutching a bag tightly against her side. The moon was high in the sky. It was later than she would have liked it to be, but it took forever for her fellow officers to finally go to bed. A new supply shipment had come in recently and they’d decided to have a drinking contest. Thank goodness, because otherwise they would have been forced to stay up all night babysitting the deportees while the commander tried to intimidate them into signing a useless paper.

Natasha had won, and she wasn’t even tipsy yet. After the others had finally crashed, she’d snuck out to the kitchen (a piece of cake considering her background), swiped enough food to last Peter a week, and then headed towards where Stark was staying. She was an expert at covering tracks and severely doubted she’d ever be caught for what she was doing tonight.

She didn’t knock before entering, nearly sending Stark into a panic when the door opened suddenly. The other woman who lived there seemed startled as well, but not confused. Stark had probably told her that Natasha would be coming.

Stark shook the kid awake gently, whispering to him in a language Natasha didn’t know. He opened his eyes blearily, nearly jumping out of his skin when he saw her standing next to the door. Stark said something else, and Peter seemed to relax. Not many things fazed Natasha, but she didn’t like that he was afraid of her. He was a child and looked like someone had struck the fear of god into him.

“This should last a little while, at least to help him get his strength back. I managed to find some vitamins, too,” She said, meeting Stark by the stove and handing him the bag. Peter watched the exchange with wide eyes. “Harry Osborn should be by later, though probably closer to dawn, with an extra blanket.”

“Thank you,” Stark answered. Natasha simply nodded. As much as she wanted to stay and make sure Peter got well, she had to get back before someone woke up and found her bed empty. She was already on thin ice after being demoted from a field agent to a glorified babysitter.

She left without fanfare and slipped back into the barracks before any of her drunk colleagues had so much as stirred. Peter stayed on her mind most of the night. Natasha was usually excellent—perfect—at compartmentalizing, but she couldn’t push thoughts of him very far away. There was so much red in her ledger, and she couldn’t help but hope maybe this had wiped a little bit of it out.

Tony dug through the bag, trying to find something that would be easy for Peter to eat. He knew the kid didn’t want to sit up, let alone try to eat anything despite how hungry he must have been, but it was unavoidable. He had to eat, and soon. Tony eventually decided on peaches. He even

found a fork somewhere near the bottom of the bag and sent Romanov an extra thanks for making his job easier.

Tony coaxed Peter into a sitting position, chest aching at the painful bruises and itchy rashes that covered his torso. He was incredibly skinny, too. His ribs protruded with every breath. Tony had noticed Peter's face becoming hollower over the weeks, but he hated that he'd never considered the rest of the side effects of such a matter until they were staring him in the face.

"I know it's probably the last thing you want to do right now, but you have to eat," Tony said, handing Peter the newly opened can of peaches and a fork. Peter stared at the ensemble with a mix of apprehension and aversion. He looked at them like they would disappear if he averted his gaze.

Peter ate slowly, but Tony was thankful that he was eating at all. Food was such a dream these days, easy to see but nearly impossible to attain.

Once Peter had finished, Tony helped him ease back down and pulled Akulina's blanket up to his chin. Peter watched him through it all with something confusing in his eyes. Soft, vulnerable perhaps. It wasn't a look Tony was used to receiving, especially from kids of all people. He hadn't been around many before and this felt like a test. And if he hadn't had Akulina around, he would have failed it miserably.

He didn't want to fail. He hated that he'd been so useless earlier. He studied medical. He should have known what to do, what to look out for even before this had happened. It shouldn't have come to this.

"You should probably rest," Akulina told Tony once Peter had fallen asleep again. Tony shook his head. Even if there wasn't a fire to keep tending to and a kid to look after, he wasn't sure that he'd have been able to. His mind was so awake that Tony wondered if it would ever shut off again.

"What am I doing?" He asked no one in particular. Akulina answered anyway.

"You are doing the best you can, just like the rest of us."

"But what if it isn't enough?" *What if I'm not enough?*

"It will be," She assured him. Tony smiled in thanks, but it didn't reach his eyes. They'd been here two months now, living with her all that time, and Tony felt that he didn't know her at all. He wanted to change that.

"How do you know what to do? How to take care of Peter, I mean."

She frowned, and Tony suddenly wished he could backtrack. She took a deep breath to compose herself before answering the question.

"There used to be kids here before Stalin came through. He sent in his men and they turned our little village into a collective. We didn't have much before that, but we didn't have anything after. A lot of the kids had gotten sick with scurvy and there just wasn't much we could do. Without proper food, all we could do was comfort them."

Oh. *Oh.*

"I'm so sorry, I don't—that's horrible."

"Yes, it is. But we can't go back. And so long as we dwell on what happened, we can't focus on what we're going to do to make it better."

Maybe Akulina wasn't as unfamiliar as Tony thought. That sounded exactly like something Mary would say.

"Thank you so much . . . I don't know what I would have done without you tonight."

"You're welcome, but something tells me you would have made it through alright."

Peter slept fitfully through the rest of the night. He woke up briefly when Harry came in to deliver the extra blanket, but he didn't say much beyond a muttered, "H'rry? 's tha' you?" Otherwise, he stayed mostly oblivious to the world around him. Tony thanked his lucky stars that Peter didn't wake up, not even when the sun rose. It saved him from the "I can stay by myself" argument. Well, *one* of those arguments. Akulina tried to get him to leave. It wasn't a fun conversation.

Peter did wake up sometime before noon. Tony made him eat even though he still didn't want to. He knew that Peter felt nauseous, but the only way to fix it was for him to force the food down. After breakfast, Peter asked what time it was. He didn't believe Tony when he said just before noon. He began shoving off the blankets and tried to get up.

"We're late for work—"

"Don't worry about that, I've got it covered," Tony said, pushing Peter back down onto the cot.

"But—"

"Don't worry about it, okay? All you have to worry about right now is feeling better."

Peter complied. Even after sleeping most of the night (for the first time in a long while) he was still exhausted. Tony kept the fire going while Peter slept through most of the day. It was more difficult sneaking to the tree line in broad daylight, but there wasn't any snow yet so he didn't have to worry about leaving tracks. Other than sneaking around, Tony spent most of his day lost in thought. Nothing important, really, but just things to pass the time.

June 1940

Tony stepped in the door of his New York penthouse and wanted nothing more than to just collapse in bed. It had been a long day at the company, even with Pepper's help. Somedays he wished he could just sign the whole company over to her, but he knew the board would never allow such a thing. Not that he particularly cared what the board thought—he was in charge of them, after all—but they'd cause such a fuss that business would never get done.

He shrugged off his coat and hung it up in the hallway closet before making his way to the kitchen for a drink. He got sidetracked when he saw a letter sitting on the counter. He certainly hadn't put it there before he left this morning, and nobody else had a reason to be up here. Tony picked up the envelope apprehensively and turned it over. His name and address had been written in loopy handwriting that Tony would recognize anywhere. Mary. It had been awhile since he'd heard from her last, almost two months, and he was worried that something was up. It was unusual for them to not talk for that long.

Dear Tony,

I'm sorry its been so long since I've written last, but things have been up in the air for quite some

time. Richard has come home from the university and told me of the rumors of the Russian annexation. Let's not kid ourselves, this has been a long time coming. Russia is determined to protect itself from Germany. They think the best way to do that is to create a wall between them.

It's a lot to ask of you, but there's a group from the University who want to create some sort of group to fight it. Not an all-out war, but something behind the scenes. I don't know anyone more suited to the task than you.

I can't write down anymore information in case this letter is intercepted, but I do hope that your answer is yes. Don't send a reply, either. I'll know what your decision is when I do—or don't—see you.

Much love,

Mary Parker

Tony stared at the letter in his hands and read it over. It certainly hadn't been a secret that Russia wanted to expand its territory, but with war already raging in Europe, it wasn't considered a high priority. The Allies had bigger issues to deal with. But Tony didn't . . . no matter where he was, Lithuania was his home. Always and forever.

That night, Tony packed his suitcase and sent a telegram to Pepper informing her that he would be gone indefinitely. The board would be a nightmare, but Pepper could wrangle them just fine. Hopefully.

Peter had gotten better over the following days, though he was still weak. Mr. Stark had taken over helping the Maximoffs for the indefinite future, or at least until Peter didn't feel constantly tired. Peter had tried protesting and insisting that he could still help, but Mr. Stark had kept him strictly on the sidelines. That was why he practically jumped at every chance he had to help someone out.

Someone knocked on the door and Mr. Stark answered it before they even had a chance to wonder what the visit was about. The officer stood in the door stiffly and looked around, disgusted. He mumbled something—something crude, no doubt—before announcing his purpose.

“We are searching for an artist,” He said plainly. Peter glanced at Mr. Stark nervously. It took all of his will power not to glance at the suitcase in the corner of the room. It held everything he'd drawn or written down since they'd gotten here. Had the NKVD found them somehow?

Or worse; had someone tipped them off? That thought made Peter even more anxious. If there was an informant in camp, there was nobody they could trust. Someone somewhere was waiting for someone else to trip up, however slightly, so they could line their own pockets. It was despicable, yes, but many found the moral turmoil tolerable if they weren't hungry anymore.

“What for?” Mr. Stark asked. He stood up quickly, unconsciously placing himself between Peter and the door. There wasn't much he could do in the way of protection if the NKVD decided they were going to arrest one or both of them, and god forbid, even shoot them. Still, he had to try if it came down to that. For Mary.

“The commander requires one,” The officer said cryptically. Then he added, “He wishes to have a portrait drawn for the Kolkhoz office. There is also a map that needs to be copied. You will be given extra rations as compensation.”

Peter's mind warred with his stomach. Logically, it was stupid to go with them alone this late at night. This could all be a trick to execute him without causing trouble. Then again, the NKVD had never much cared about how much trouble they caused. They just started waving their guns around when the deportees got out of hand. His stomach, however, told him to go. Extra rations could be the difference between life and death, especially with winter on the horizon.

"I'll do it," Peter said. He didn't want to be in the same room as the commandant, certainly not long enough to draw a portrait, but the extra rations were too precious to pass on. Besides, he didn't know of any other artists in their group. He'd likely be forced if he didn't go willingly.

Peter didn't wait for the officer waved him on. The quicker they got this over with the sooner he could lay down and desperately try to get some sleep. Peter hoped the Soviets had pencils and paper wherever they were taking him. There was no way he was going to risk his drawings getting discovered.

He slipped past the officer in the doorway and into the cold Altai air. Peter shivered and instinctively pulled his jacket tighter against his small frame. Mr. Stark protested weakly, tired from the day. Peter ignored him as the door closed behind him and the officer began walking. *After everything he's done for me*, Peter thought, *I can do this one thing for him*.

The walk to the office was strangely quiet. There was no whistling wind, no rustling leaves, and not even the hard ground crunched underfoot. Occasionally people peeked out of the doors and makeshift windows of the shacks, their shadowy silhouettes watching like ghosts. Walking to the commander's office felt like a death march.

When they reached the small building, the officer glanced around before opening the door. Paranoid? Or something more?

A gust of warm air hit Peter like a brick wall when the door opened. The officer stepped in first, nearly stepping on Peter's toes to get out of the cold. Peter's body practically sagged in relief once he'd stepped inside. Oh, how long it had been since he had been truly warm. Winter had been moving in with earnest now. The first snow couldn't be more than two weeks out if they were lucky.

Many of the Lithuanians had been praying for winter to stay away. They simply weren't ready. Most had nothing but their summer clothes or the outfits they'd been arrested in; it had been June when they'd been torn from their homes.

Belatedly, Peter noticed there were two NKVD officers in the room with him. The man who had brought him here and the redhead he'd been hearing stories about for weeks. She was rumored to be one of the nicer ones, not pushing the deportees as hard as some like Rumlow. Peter tried to remember her name, but nothing came to mind.

It was the redhead who gestured to the desk in the back of the room. Thankfully a set of pens, pencils, and paper sat waiting. They all looked fairly new and unused, a shock to Peter up here in the mountains. Much of the equipment he'd seen them using was rundown or older. He assumed that the more reliable stuff was needed at the front.

"He'll be here soon," She said. Her voice was deep, not nearly as harsh as Peter had grown used to from the others around here. Peter nodded soundlessly and picked up a sharpened pencil and the sketch pad. The lighting certainly wasn't ideal—mostly candles with one electric lamp in the corner—but Peter had worked in worse.

Ten minutes later, the commander still hadn't arrived.

Another ten minutes passed, and the chair opposite Peter was as empty as it had ever been. Peter's eyes began to slip closed of their own accord. Maybe he could finally get some rest now that it wasn't so cold . . .

Peter's head lolled sideways, resting uncomfortably against his shoulder, and his grip on the pencil lessened. It almost fell to the floor. As if on cue, the door swung open abruptly. Peter jumped, wide awake. A freezing gust of wind followed closely behind the commander as he walked into the room. The officer who had escorted Peter here wasted no time in stoking the raging fire in the brick fireplace.

"Puny little thing," He said. He chuckled lightly as he settled into his plush chair. "It's a miracle you've made it this far, tiny as you are."

Peter bristled at the comment but forced himself not to react. He was not going to give him the satisfaction. And besides, it wouldn't do him any good to wait all this time and go home empty handed. No, not home. Home was a small apartment a thousand miles away. It could have even been a million miles away for all the difference it would make. It didn't matter if Lithuania was one mile or a billion miles away; it still felt as if he would never get there.

Peter forced the thoughts to the edge of his mind and looked up at his subject. His jaw was sharp, but his cheeks appeared hollow. Simple genetics, or had the soldiers been facing leaner times as well?

He drew the portrait fast, not wanting to spend any more time with the NKVD than necessary. It had been barely fifteen minutes before he presented his work. The commander tsked disapprovingly when Peter showed him the finished picture. It wasn't his best work, though it was a miracle Peter had been able to get through the entire thing without drawing horns coming out of his forehead and fire shooting out of his mouth.

"Again. How can you expect to draw me accurately if you refuse to look at me?"

Peter turned the page roughly, the noise echoing in the otherwise silent room. He fought the urge to roll his eyes like he might have done to one of his teachers. He looked up to once more to study his subject more in depth. This time he noticed a small scar above his eye. Combat or basic training? Or maybe something different all together? Peter remembered one of the kids in his fourth year who had a similar scar from falling off his bike.

When Peter was done almost thirty minutes later, the paper was almost snatched from his hands. The NKVD commander stared at it, studied it, picked every detail apart in his mind. Peter's nerves were jumpy from the unpredictable officers. He didn't to draw him again. He wanted to leave.

"What do you think?" He asked the other two officers. He held up the portrait side by side with his own face for a comparison. The exchange reminded Peter of an old Greek myth he'd studied in Lit class. Narcissus, the man so enchanted with his own image that he spent eternity staring into a mirror.

"It looks great, sir." The man responded. The female nodded in approval. Without another word, the commander left. The other officer left as well, leaving Peter alone with the girl. She walked over wordlessly and placed a pile of maps on the table. The name tag on her uniform read "Romanov". He made a mental note, *Scary but supposedly nice NKVD officer – Romanov.*

Peter tried to memorize each line and word that he copied, but the lines turned into snakes in his mind. They writhed and twisted, and Peter knew he wouldn't be able to remember them the correct way. Copying the words proved more difficult, the Cyrillic letters jumbling together on the page.

He had no way of remembering them for future reference. Even if he could have Mr. Stark translate them, he wouldn't even know how to pronounce them clearly enough for Mr. Stark to have the barest idea of what he was saying.

Struggling to keep his eyes open, Peter copied the last map clumsily. He worried that Romanov would make him redo it, but she gave him a look that could have passed as sympathetic and handed him two extra ration tickets and sent him on his way. No ghostly faces peered through makeshift windows this time, but Peter would have preferred they did. The walk back to Akulina's place was more eerie than the walk to the office had been.

When Peter forced open the door, Mr. Stark was still awake. He leaned tiredly against the wall, almost like he'd been forcing himself to stay awake until Peter got back. The thought sent unexpected warmth through Peter's body.

"I'm back," Peter said quietly, afraid to wake Akulina. She still scared him even though Mr. Stark insisted she was alright.

Mr. Stark's eyes snapped open at the sound of Peter's voice. He tried to blink away the tiredness and called Peter over.

"Are you okay? Did – did they hurt you?" He asked, checking Peter over for injuries. Peter shook his head. He held up the two ration tickets, and Mr. Stark sighed.

"You didn't have to go," He said. Peter looked down, studying the mud floor like it was the most interesting thing in the world. "Especially if you didn't want to."

"I did want to. You do so much for me, and I just . . . I wanted to be able to do something for you, too." Peter said. He could feel Mr. Stark's eyes on him, and he wished he could melt into the floor.

"Peter, this isn't like that, okay? I don't want you to think I'm doing things for you because I expect you to help me. It's my job to help you."

"I don't want to be a burden. You already have so much to worry about—"

"That's not what I meant," Mr. Stark said. He took a deep breath before continuing. "This is coming out wrong. I don't want you to think that you're a burden, or a problem, or anything like that. Mary asked--"

"She isn't here, Mr. Stark. My parents aren't here. You don't have to take care of me just because you said you would. I'm fifteen, not five."

"That's still not what I meant. Emotions are—well—not the easiest for me to talk about. I'm not just taking care of you because Mary asked me to. I care about you, Peter."

"Oh," Peter said, voice quiet. "I, um, I care about you too."

The words felt clunky, maybe even awkward coming from his mouth, but not wrong. That was why he had gone to the commandant's office, wasn't it? On the surface it was because he felt like he needed to do something in return, but deep down it was because he cared.

"And for the record, I appreciate what you did. But you don't have to worry about me. I can take care of myself."

"I just hate feeling so useless. This was the one thing I could do, actually really do, to help. It felt stupid not to do it."

“You aren’t useless, Peter. And I know that you’re fifteen, but sometimes you have to let other people take care of you. Sometimes you can’t do it by yourself.”

“What if I have to?” Peter said, more to himself than to Mr. Stark. *What if you leave me behind, just like my parents did? What if I have to do it by myself?*

“You won’t, because I’ll be here.”

“But what if you aren’t?”

“I will be.”

Chapter Nine

Chapter Summary

The end of Act II is upon us!

Chapter Notes

Yes, this chapter is shorter (considerably so) than my normal ones, but don't worry, it's a double update Monday! The only reason I'm doing it this way is so that I can finish Act II and start Act III on a new chapter (I'm really picky about my formatting and stuff -- so this way I can keep things the way I like without disappointing you guys!)

Enjoy!

The NKVD called Peter to the commandant's office to copy more maps the next night. When they knocked, Mr. Stark assured him he didn't have to go, but Peter went anyway. He couldn't pass, no matter how much he wanted to, on the opportunity. It was selfish.

The office was warm, and Peter was always so fucking cold. The extra ration tickets were a bonus, too. The walk was less creepy this time, with the ground crunching underfoot and the wind howling. It pulled at his dirty summer jacket and whipped his too-long curls back and forth. Peter was sure that it was going to snow tonight.

Romanov was the one to escort Peter once again, her face stony. She glanced back at Peter every so often like she expected him to blow away in the wind. He kept up with her as best as he could, but he constantly found himself a few steps behind. Romanov didn't say anything.

Copying maps tonight went much the same as last night, except this time there were extra files strewn about the desk. They assumed Peter couldn't read anything – which was true – but he recognized the pictures in the files. Peter knew many of the subjects, in fact. All of them were none the wiser that a picture was being taken of them. Some appeared to be taken from across the street, or in shops, or even through their dining room windows.

Peter saw a picture of himself in the pile closest to him. The picture shocked him right out of his skin. He was sitting down for dinner with his family. It was from four months ago, the last time Ben, May, and Harley had visited. Peter remembered him and Harley kicking each other under the table until Mary had scolded them for it.

Peter's blood ran cold as he saw the pictures of his parents. Their file was full of papers and notes. What had they done? Did they really deserve to be here after all?

Peter waited until the NKVD had all turned their backs and quietly slipped the file under his shirt. He'd have to ask Mr. Stark to translate it. The adrenaline now rushing through his system made it difficult for Peter to accurately duplicate the lines. They were shaky and poorly done, but the NKVD let him leave without making him redo anything.

He practically ran back to the shack, clutching the file to make sure it wouldn't fall out. Peter looked around nervously at the empty road to make sure nobody watched him as he pulled the door tightly shut. Before Mr. Stark could say anything, he pulled out the file and asked him to translate it.

"Where – did you steal that?" Mr. Stark whisper yelled. Peter nodded.

"Please, Mr. Stark, its about my parents. I can't read it because its in Russian, but I need to know." Peter said. He used his puppy dog eyes, hoping it would be enough to convince Mr. Stark to help him.

But instead of reading it, Mr. Stark's expression turned hard. He quickly took the file from Peter's hands and rushed out the door. The rush of air that blew in was icier than Mr. Stark's stare. Across the room, Akulina stirred. She turned over, and Peter let out a breath of relief that she hadn't woken up.

Whatever warmth was still left over from their conversation last night was gone. Peter decided to go to bed, but he found that he couldn't fall asleep. Twenty minutes passed before another blast of cold air blew in accompanied by soft footsteps. Peter shut his eyes and pretended to be asleep.

He'd wanted information about his parents, about why they'd been arrested. Why wouldn't Mr. Stark just let him have it? What in those files could have been so terrible that he wasn't allowed to know about it?

"I know you're still awake," Mr. Stark said eventually. Peter did his best not to stir. He wasn't sure that he could hold a conversation right now without crying or yelling and he didn't want to do either. He thought that if he kept pretending to be asleep, Mr. Stark would get the message. Apparently that had been too much to hope for.

"If somebody had figured out that you were the one who stole that file, you would have gotten into so much trouble. Peter, they have, and would, kill for less. You can't go around doing dangerous things."

"Why not? It doesn't matter anyway," Peter said. "It doesn't matter if they shoot me tonight, or next week, or in two months. I'm never getting out of here."

Tony took a deep breath, trying to figure out what to say. The kid's voice was so . . . *broken*. This was so different from the resilient Peter he'd come to know over the past months. There were a million things he wanted to say; not to give up hope, that they would make it out of here, that there was nothing to worry about. But they were all lies. Empty promises.

Harry caught Peter on his way to the workshop. Early morning was the only time Harry had a chance to slip away from the NKVD, and he had overheard something important the night before. Peter had been surprised to see him. They hadn't seen each other since two weeks ago, and Peter had only been partially coherent then.

"Hey, Harry, I'm— I wanted to say thank you. For helping me. I mean. You didn't have to do that. Especially after how I treated you—"

"Thanks, but that's not important anymore," Harry interjected. Peter shook his head and nervously glanced around.

"Yes, it is. I'm trying to apologize for just completely ditching you. That wasn't right. I know this

isn't an excuse, but it was just so hard seeing you and your mom . . . when I couldn't—" Peter paused to take a breath. It felt like he'd forgotten how to hold a conversation. "When I couldn't see mine."

Harry didn't miss the pain in Peter's eyes. And if he didn't have something to tell him, too, he might have dwelt on the apology.

"They're taking you somewhere else," He blurted. Peter's gaze snapped to his, a million questions on the tip of his tongue.

"Where?"

"I don't know. Someone mentioned the 'transfer', so I snooped around some when I was cleaning the commander's office last night. There's a list of names."

"Who else is on it?" Peter's stomach twisted into knots and he thought his meager dinner from last night might make another appearance. He tried to tamp down his anxiety until he could get more answers. Freaking out wasn't going to do anyone any good right now.

"Mr. Stark is on it, Steve Rogers, Morgan and her mom, and the Maximoff twins are too. The other names are ones I don't recognize, but I think there will be people from other camps as well."

"So . . ." Peter started, the information sinking in. He felt selfishly relieved that he wasn't the only one being transferred. "When do we leave?"

"The day after tomorrow."

Harry knew he had to go, and so did Peter if they didn't want to be late, but it had been so long since they'd had a real conversation. They'd spent so much time together on the train. Had talked about anything and everything to make the trip a little more bearable.

Harry pulled Peter into a hug. Peter stiffened before returning it. Physical contact was so foreign to him now.

"Thank you for making things a little less terrible," Harry said sincerely.

"You too. Just try not to have too much fun without me."

The two parted ways unceremoniously. Goodbyes were inevitable in the world they now found themselves in, but that didn't make them any easier.

Chapter Ten

Chapter Summary

With Act III, things are as uncertain as ever.

Chapter Notes

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Peter's heart dropped when the trucks stopped and the NKVD forced them out only a few hours later. They were at a countryside depot and a train was waiting for them. He tensed when they were being forced towards the only car with an open door. Mr. Stark pushed him forward, unwilling to risk an incident with the NKVD.

Peter climbed into the car like his bones were made of lead. It was hard to force his limbs to move when they wanted nothing more than to run. His one saving grace was that there was a light hanging from the ceiling. The car was actually bigger this time around, as well as not being tightly packed. There were some other passengers inside already, leaning tiredly against the walls or laying on the floor. Peter chose an empty spot near the back. It was as far away from everyone else as he could manage. Most of the other Lithuanians followed suit and formed a group in the back. Mr. Stark sat beside him, and Peter leaned into his side.

The two sets of passengers eyed each other, almost warily, but didn't speak. Each group looked worse for wear, but none of the Lithuanians (sans Peter) looked sickly. On the other hand, the other group were sporting sunken eyes and red faces. One of the children laying down near the front was a gross shade of yellow with her eyes swollen shut. Peter wanted to stay as far away from her as possible.

"They look worse off than we do," Steve commented idly. The train had yet to start moving yet, and Peter's stomach was already churning in anticipation. He hated the constant vibration of the wheels gliding unevenly over the track.

"They probably had it rougher than we did." Wanda replied. Her and Pietro were still holding onto each other tightly as they observed the others. Peter wondered what it was like to have a twin, or even a sibling. It might have been nice in another life. Maybe Peter would have taught them to paint and they'd spend Sunday afternoon painting while their parents read in the living room. They'd walk to school together, surely, and argue over who was cooler.

Finally, one of the people from the other group broke the awkward silence between them. It was a middle aged gentleman, the lines in his face cut deeper from starvation and stress. He introduced himself as Alvis Kalnina and informed them that they had just come from the Karaganda work camp, which had been mostly made up of Latvians.

"It is rather far west of here. We've been traveling over a week," Alvis said. "They have been feeding us better in that week than the three months we spent in Karaganda."

“Do you have any idea of where we might be going?” Steve asked. Alvis shook his head. It wasn’t a surprise. Information was scarce these days. Another one of the Latvians chimed in next.

“We are going to America,” She mumbled, more to herself than the group. “America.” She pulled her knees to her chest and repeatedly mumbled, “America, America.”

“Her name is Esther. She’s been going on about Latvia since we got on the train.”

Esther continued to mumble things about Latvia. Peter did his best to tune her out. He didn’t even want to think about where they might be going despite all the joking earlier. There was a very distinct, almost certain, possibility, that it would be much worse than the Altai village had been.

Eventually, the rocking of the train lulled Peter into a light doze. He hated that everything seemed to exhaust him these days. It was probably all the anxiety and stress that constantly plagued him. Peter just wanted to rest. He wanted to sleep in a real bed inside a real house. He wanted fluffy pillows and fuzzy blankets and a comfortable mattress. He wanted home.

Late May, 1940

Peter woke up late that morning and was rushing to get dressed in time for school. The walk wasn’t long, but he didn’t want to run if he could help it. He’d rather be a couple minutes late rather than sweaty and gross for the rest of the day.

Five minutes later he was standing in the kitchen, grabbing breakfast, when his parents walked in. They were discussing what they had to do for the day, as usual.

“I have to mail that letter today, too, if he has any hope of getting here in time,” His mother said, not noticing that Peter was in the room. She had thought that he’d left for school already, and he informed her that he had woken up late today.

“I can take it to the post office after school today, if you want,” Peter offered. Most children didn’t like running errands for their parents, but he didn’t mind. The man who worked in the post office was always nice to him and had a fluffy cat that always slept on the counter.

Peter reached for the addressed envelope on the counter, but Mary quickly picked it up before Peter could see who it was for.

“It’s fine, honey. I’ll take care of it on the way to work. Make sure you get to school on time.” She leaned in for a quick hug and was out the door before Peter could say anything else. His dad was close on her heels, and Peter was left alone in the apartment. What had that been about?

Peter stood in the kitchen for several moments trying to figure out why Mary had been so weird about the letter. She had seemed off lately, anyway, but now Peter was genuinely concerned. His parents were normally unshakable. What had them so nervous?

At some point in the middle of the night, Peter woke up to find everyone else was asleep. The overhead light was still on and casted an eerie glow as it swung back and forth. He watched it swing, entranced by the rhythmic motion. Did the light always stay on, or had they forgotten to turn it off?

Peter sighed and tried to go back to sleep, but he couldn’t. He wished he hadn’t fallen asleep in the middle of the afternoon. Now he’d be awake, and alone, for the rest of the night. He could wake up Mr. Stark . . . but what for? Mr. Stark slept even less than he did. It wasn’t fair to wake him up the

one time he actually did seem to be sleeping. Besides, Peter told himself, it wasn't really that bad.

As if just remembering the dream he'd had, Peter thought about his family. He'd always complained about having to go to those stupid reunions and parties, but he didn't think they were so stupid anymore. He'd give anything just to hide from the aunt who always pinched everyone's cheeks just a bit too hard. Or to sneak out to the back field with Harley. Even to get scolded by their parents for ditching.

"Why are you awake?"

Peter had zoned out and hadn't noticed Morgan, who was now awake. She leaned up against the opposite wall and had her knees pulled close to her chest. She stared at Peter with wide eyes.

"I'm not tired. Why are you awake?" He responded. Morgan shrugged her shoulders.

"Liale woke me up. She said you were lonely."

Liale. That name sounded familiar to Peter, but he didn't know who it belonged to. They were the only two awake, and he hadn't heard anyone else talking.

"She's my dolly. She's dead now," Morgan said, sensing the gears turning in Peter's head like only small children seemed to do. Peter gave her a concerned look. Morgan kept talking anyway. "The soldiers threw her in the air and used her for target practice."

"Oh, um, I'm—I'm sorry," Peter stammered. He'd only had a few conversations with her, but Peter was starting to wonder whether she was still sane. Dolls didn't talk, and especially not dead ones.

"It's okay. She tells me things now. She told me that I should talk to you because you're lonely."

"I—I'm not lonely. I'm fine," Peter defended. Morgan shook her head.

"Liale wouldn't lie. Besides, I know how it feels. Everyone here is just so mean. Except you. You're not too bad."

"You're not too bad, either." *Except that I'm convinced you're crazy.*

"Liale likes you too. She says that you're a good person. That means we can be friends. Do you want to be friends?"

"Sure," Peter said. Morgan nodded happily to herself and laid back down. The train rocked her to sleep almost immediately, and Peter was left to wander off with his thoughts again. Morgan had seemed a little . . . off, for sure, but maybe she was just lonely. There weren't very many other five-year-olds running around in Russian work camps. Come to think of it, Peter hadn't seen anyone else Morgan's age at all. It was a miracle that she'd lasted this long.

Instead of speculating about his new friend, Peter chose to slip into a daydream to pass the time. It was easier than falling down the rabbit hole of his own mind. He pretended he was back in that field on the day they were brought to the village. If he thought hard enough, he could feel the warm sun and light breeze. It was peaceful in his mind, though the actual day was anything but. It was the best memory he had of being gone and thinking of Before was just too painful now.

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The train stopped later that day, around one according to Alvis's watch, and the NKVD brought them food and water. The food was better than anything they'd had recently, and it brought about speculation. Some had thought they were being taken away to be disposed of, but then why feed

them well, or at all? Esther insisted that it was because they were going home.

“They’re preparing us,” She mumbled, eyes dazed. “That way we will be healthy when they take us back home.”

“She’s wrong,” Morgan announced. Beside her, her mother tried to shush her. “Liale would have told me if we were going home.”

“Then where are we going?” Steve asked, unamused. It had been little more than a day and he was tired of hearing about Liale. Or anything, really. It seemed that every conversation sent the man over the edge. If he wasn’t telling people to shut up, he was curled up in the corner trying not to hear them.

“I can’t tell. She said it was a secret.”

“Of course, it is,” He grumbled. “Everything is a secret with these people. What does it matter anyway, its not like we can tell anyone who’s going to help us.”

“Hey, no need to be hostile.” Mr. Stark interjected. Peter glanced sideways at him. Aside from the first few weeks, it wasn’t like him to join in on anyone’s conversations. He tended to observe quietly and fiddle with whatever was available.

“I’m not hostile; I’m truthful.”

“No one ever said you couldn’t be both. Besides, she’s six. Leave her be.”

“She’s the one who started it, Tony.”

“You’re the adult, Steve. Act like it.”

Peter pulled up the collar of his shirt to hide his giggle, but he wasn’t very effective at it because he saw Mr. Stark smile at him. Steve, ever the petulant child, rolled his eyes and muttered something about them being “two peas in a pod”. Nevertheless, he stopped talking, and that made this a win.

Tony played with a small piece of scrap metal he’d picked up from the village. It was late, and Peter slept fitfully beside him while he forced himself to stay awake. Sleeping wasn’t worth the nightmares it would bring with it. The kid had taken to using his shoulder as a pillow, though Tony imagined it couldn’t be that comfortable. Not that there was much in the way of comfort these days, but he knew that if he tried something like that his neck would be sore for days.

Peter shifted slightly, face twisted in discomfort. Tony slipped an arm around the boy and pulled him closer. He’d argue that the gesture was for comfort, but it wasn’t for Peter. He’d never know that any of this happened.

“I’m sorry,” He said, voice low. He didn’t want to wake anyone else and explain why he was talking to someone who wouldn’t hear him anyway.

“You deserve so much more than this. It’s too bad you didn’t get to go to Vilnius. You would love it there, especially in the summer. My family has house there. It’s much too big for my taste, but it would be fun for you to explore.”

Tony sighed. “God, what am I doing? I might be going crazy. That must be it. That’s why I’m talking to someone who can’t hear me. It’s because I’m crazy.”

“You’re not crazy. Sometimes it’s easier to talk when you think no one is listening.”

Tony nearly jumped out of his skin when Peter started talking. It was a miracle that he hadn’t shouted and woken everyone up. He was suddenly aware of their position, but Peter just looked up at him like he hadn’t just scared the shit out of him.

“I didn’t know you were awake.”

“Yeah . . . I woke up a few minutes ago.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I don’t know. You seemed to be having a moment. I didn’t want to ruin it. But my point still stands. You’re not crazy. If anyone here is actually crazy, it’s Esther. Or Morgan, honestly.”

“How is Morgan crazy?” Tony would agree that she could be a bit . . . odd sometimes, but crazy?

“A few nights ago, I was awake and she crawled over to tell me that Liale said I was lonely. Liale was her doll before the NKVD shot her,” Peter answered. “She says that Liale tells her things like some sort of angel or something.”

“Oh. That is a little bit crazy,” Tony admitted.

It was quiet for a few moments, but not awkwardly so. It was comforting, in fact, for each to know the other was simply there. Peter had begun to drift off again, his lucidness waning, but he spoke again before he could fall asleep.

“I’d still like to go to Vilnius someday,” He said wistfully. He’d already closed his eyes again.

“I’ll take you someday, then. We’ll hit all the good spots.”

“Really, Mr. Stark?”

“Sure, kid.”

They stood on the edge of the Angara river, about thirty feet down from a small dock that jutted out into the icy waters. The train had stopped at a countryside depot. The sun sat near the horizon despite the late hour. They were far enough north now that they were experiencing the civil polar twilight.

There were at least two hundred of them, maybe more, and Tony pulled Peter closer to his side. Not only was it cold, but Tony was afraid to lose him in the crowd. Peter let his head drop tiredly on Tony’s shoulder and closed his eyes. They’d been standing for little more than twenty minutes, but he hadn’t been able to rest properly on the train.

“Are you scared, Mr. Stark?” He asked, mumbling the words into the man’s jacket. It was such a loaded question, and Tony wasn’t sure how to respond. The truth was, he was scared. It was difficult not to be. Always wondering what’s going to happen next, whether they were going to starve or not, whether Peter was going to get sick again. . . He was scared *shitless*. But he was the adult here. He couldn’t admit that. When he didn’t answer, Peter spoke again.

“It’s okay to admit it, you know, if you are. I—I’m scared too. And I just—you don’t have to hide everything. From me, I mean. That wouldn’t be fair.”

“I appreciate that, kid, but it's not your job to worry about me and my feelings. I can take care of myself.”

“I never said you couldn't. But not everything is about jobs—about what you have to do—sometimes it's just about what you want to do.”

“And this is what you want to do? It's not fun.”

“I don't care. You've done the same for me, and just because you can do it alone doesn't mean that you have to.”

And damn Peter for using his own words against him. Tony couldn't argue with him because it would undermine what he said, and Peter knew it. The kid was top of his class, of course he was smart. Tony didn't know what to say. He had too much emotional baggage—*way too much*—to unload on a poor sixteen-year-old kid (despite how much he wanted to argue that he wasn't a kid).

Tony took a deep breath and released it slowly, watching the fog swirl in the frigid air. Peter was so kind and sweet, he should have seen this coming. This was exactly the type of thing Peter would do, and now he's done it, and Tony doesn't know how to react. It had been so long since he'd really opened up to anyone that wasn't Mary.

“Okay,” Tony said finally. Peter moved to look up at him.

“Really?” He asked.

“Yes. But if I might ask, why?”

“What do you mean?” Peter looked at Tony with a confused look in his eyes. Tony didn't feel great about the words that came out next, or how sharply he said it. Alas, he couldn't take back the words once he'd spoken them.

“I mean why are you suddenly interested.” Peter stepped back like he'd been smacked, and Tony winced. He immediately missed the warmth.

“It's not sudden,” Peter said defensively. “I've been trying this whole time and you always just shut me out.”

And Tony was going to say, “*No, I haven't.*” But that wasn't quite true. Peter had tried. Tony hadn't always shut him out on purpose, but he'd still done it. He was always too tired or too busy or didn't want to talk and that wasn't fair on Peter.

“I'm sorry,” Tony apologized, but Peter wasn't done yet.

“I feel so alone, and nobody listens because they say, ‘You've got Tony.’ But I don't. You're always halfway out the door. We've been together for months and I don't even know what your middle name is—”

“It's Edward,” Tony said. Peter was right, and Tony wished he weren't. He wished that he'd figured this out before they had to argue about it in front of a crowd of people. They were pretending to not pay attention, but since hardly anything interesting happened anymore, it was difficult not to eavesdrop.

“What?”

“My middle name. It's Edward.”

Peter paused for a painfully long minute, and Tony suddenly felt like a college kid who was about to get scolded for interrupting the professor. The two stared at each other awkwardly. Tony could see the gears turning in Peter's mind, and when it happened, it was the last thing he expected to hear. Peter laughed.

"Mine is Benjamin. Isn't that awful?"

"Peter Benjamin Parker. That's not awful. It's a lot better than Anthony Edward Stark."

"Yeah," Peter agreed. "It is better."

It's been two hours, and they are still waiting. The NKVD eventually announced that boats were delayed but conveniently didn't say how late. So instead of standing indefinitely, everyone decided to sit down despite the gravel that made up the bank. Even sitting on the small pebbles was better than standing. To block some of the wind, they stood their suitcases up and crouched behind them. The improvement was marginal but welcome.

Peter chatted with Wanda and Pietro for a while. They took turns skipping rocks across the river when the NKVD had their backs turned, but the rocks never made it far before they were carried away with the currents. The trio soon grew tired of their rebellious game once they'd almost been spotted twice. Wanda and Pietro started a conversation with another one of the Latvians, though Peter didn't know his name. He stopped listening when they started talking of home.

He drew lines in the gravel to pass the time. The sharper ones hurt his fingers, but he didn't care. It hurt, but it was nice to feel something besides the constant hunger that twisted his stomach.

"Hey—don't do that," Mr. Stark said, grabbing Peter's wrist and pulling his hand off the ground. His grip gentle but firm. He brushed away the small bits of gravel that had embedded themselves in Peter's freezing fingers. Peter watched him like a deer in headlights.

"Sorry," Peter mumbled, suddenly feeling out of place. Mr. Stark sighed.

"You're going to get your fingers cut if you do that. I don't want you to get hurt," He said. There was something different in his voice, but Peter couldn't place it. Softer, perhaps.

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Three days later the barge arrived. The NKVD ordered everyone to their feet as they watched it pull up to the small dock. Wind tugged at them while they boarded, blowing up an icy mist from the river itself. The gangplank was made of rusted metal, and Peter was afraid that he would slip and fall into the river. The current wasn't strong enough to pull him away, of course, but getting soaking wet wasn't going to do him any favors.

They settled down on the barge quickly. Wanda and Pietro sat near them as they had for most of the trip, and Peter was grateful for something familiar. He quite liked the Maximoff's and often found himself wishing they'd had the chance to meet in less-than-ideal circumstances. They were in the same car in the beginning, after all, it was possible they'd lived near each other in Kaunas.

Peter hated the feeling of the boat rocking underneath him even more than he hated the vibration of the train. Sure, the train made his legs numb, but the boat made him nauseous. He wanted to run to the railing and throw up what meager food they'd been given.

"Are you okay?" Mr. Stark asked, noticing the pained look on Peter's face. Peter simply shook his head. He thought that if he opened his mouth to answer, he might throw up. They hadn't even started going anywhere yet.

"Do you want to lay down?"

Peter nodded. Mr. Stark carefully eased him down until Peter's head was resting in his lap. The metal floor was achingly cold against Peter's back, but he didn't focus on much more than the churning of his stomach. It got worse when the boat had actually begun to travel up the river, and Peter couldn't help but whimper. He was so tired of feeling like shit. He couldn't even remember what it felt like to have a good night's sleep or a proper meal. *I can't take this anymore.*

"Can you tell me a story?" Peter asked. He felt like a child for asking, but he wanted a distraction. Mr. Stark hummed, trying to think of one. He didn't really know what to say. He didn't have many happy memories to share, or even a favorite book he might be able to quote.

"About what?" He asked.

"Anything . . . I just need a distraction right now."

Peter waited patiently while Mr. Stark tried to pick something to talk about. Part of him felt bad for putting the man on the spot like that. The other part desperately wanted something else to think about besides his nausea and general pain.

Mr. Stark eventually launched into a story about how he'd met his best friend, James Rhodes, at university. Peter focused on the words as best he could, but they seemed to go in one ear and out the other. It worked though, and Peter soon found himself sharing details about his own best friend. All in all, it felt like a step in the right direction.

It was dark when they arrived, but that didn't mean much in the way of time these days. They'd travelled so far into the arctic circle that the sun wasn't visible above the horizon, and Peter didn't

realize how much he missed it until he stood on the desolate shore. He shivered more than ever, his layers of clothes useless against the cold.

The group of battered deportees looked around the barren landscape, confusion written plainly in their features. There were no buildings, or even tents. There was the beginning of a forest nearly a mile back, but the land was otherwise flat. A small sign marked their location as Trofimovsk.

“Where are we supposed to stay?” Asked one brave Latvian. The NKVD laughed mirthlessly and gestured at the place around them.

“Here,” He said. When he was met with more confused, and some angry, stares, he explained that they were to build their own shelters. Not from the materials they brought with them, those were for the barracks and a bakery, but with driftwood and whatever materials they could scavenge. But before they could do that, they had to unload everything from the boat.

They carried crates of food, vodka, bricks, building supplies, blankets, and clothes. The Maximoff twins took careful note of what was in each crate in case the chance to steal arose. Peter wouldn’t be surprised if supplies went missing as soon as that evening. If he could sneak away from Mr. Stark long enough, he would probably go with them.

Peter was beyond tired when they’d carried everything to shore. His arms ached from carrying and his legs ached from moving after so long. His fingers felt numb, and part of him wasn’t sure that they were really still there. Peter examined them in the moonlight, counting to make sure they were all still attached. When he was satisfied that they were, he looked around for Mr. Stark. He quickly spotted him talking to Steve and made his way over.

“I’m fucking done, Tony. I’m not doing their bidding anymore,” Steve spat, face twisted in anger. Mr. Stark was trying to calm him down, but he wasn’t having much luck.

“Don’t do it, Steve, that means they’ve won.”

“I don’t care. I lost a long time ago and I’m not going to help them take over Europe any longer.”

Noticing a commotion, others began to gather around them. Peter simply watched until he heard Morgan somewhere off to his left.

“Russia are the ones helping Europe. They’re with the allies,” She said confidently. Steve snorted.

“Russia only wants to take over Europe before Germany does. It doesn’t matter who’s hands we end up in. We’re already dead.”

Morgan’s mother rushed forward out of the crowd and scooped her from the ground. At first, Morgan didn’t acknowledge what Steve had said until she buried her face deep in her mother’s shoulder and whispered, “Liale is dead.” Adding to the chaos, she began to yell at Steve for saying such a thing to a child. Steve yelled back and told her that whether she wanted to admit it or not, he was right.

Peter looked past them and saw Officer Romanov standing with her gun trained on them. He tensed up and tugged on the sleeve of Mr. Stark’s jacket to get his attention without causing a bigger scene. Even in the dark, though, Peter could see that her finger was nowhere near the trigger and the hesitation in her eyes.

Following Peter’s cue towards Natasha, Mr. Stark stepped in front of him protectively while he still tried to talk Steve down. Steve was too far gone to listen, and when he noticed Natasha, he ran towards her. The crowd held its breath while they waited for the bang and the resulting thud. Peter

closed his eyes and saw the bodies on the train platform, except they were now joined by Steve.

There was a thud, and Peter instinctively opened his eyes. He expected to see red, and instead saw Steve and Mr. Stark both on the ground. He panicked, thinking this was it. He was going to be alone and figure out how to survive and—

“Don’t you ever fucking do that again,” Mr. Stark said. He pulled himself off the ground and wrestled Steve to his feet. Steve glared at him but seemed otherwise unharmed. The small group dispersed, but Peter waited. He stared at the spot on the ground as if he expected them to really be dead. He didn’t look away until Mr. Stark tapped his shoulder.

“I’m sorry you had to see that,” He apologized. Peter shook his head to clear the disturbing image.

“It’s . . . well it’s not okay. But nobody got hurt,” Peter said. The last part was more of a reassurance to himself, which Mr. Stark knew. He nodded and gave Peter a quick hug.

“Yeah, nobody got hurt,” He echoed quietly.

The NKVD ordered them to divide up into groups of ten to fifteen people to build huts, or jurtas, for them to stay in. Steve tried to slip away and join another group, but Tony grabbed his shirt collar and pulled him back to the group. Steve tried to fight back, but even though Tony wasn’t in good shape, he was still stronger.

Tony wished he would just calm down. Even before they were taken, everything made Steve angry, and usually nothing more than Tony’s decisions. If it weren’t for Mary and Richard, Steve probably wouldn’t have listened to him at all. Jesus Christ. Why can’t he act rational for once? Tony wondered. Everything for him was rush in and think later. And this time, like it had many others, would have gotten him killed if Tony hadn’t stepped in.

Their group of twelve (which consisted of the twins, Steve, Peter, Esther, Alvis, Morgan and her mother, and a few other people they didn’t know) split into groups to collect materials for their jurta. The younger ones scavenged along the Laptev Sea for driftwood while the adults made the hike to the tree line for branches. It was unpleasant work, but they were spurred on by the knowledge that if they didn’t have shelter before the next snowstorm, they were goners.

Once they’d gathered some materials, the group decided on where to put the jurta and dug holes for the supporting posts. It was more hacking than digging, though, because the ground was mostly ice. But they soon had a frame on which to put sticks and leaves. It took the group four days to assemble their jurta. They finished it in the nick of time, for not long after, came the first storm.

They were huddled inside for three days before the wind began to let up its constant howling. The snow had piled over two feet high outside. Simply walking outside was a nightmare because the snow would melt into the deportee’s shoes and pants, leaving them freezing and unable to warm up.

As the time went on, though, they slowly acclimated to the conditions of their new home. Or, no. Not their new home. Home was a thousand miles away. Trofimovsk was nothing more than another destination on their journey. A temporary stop.

It was mid-February, and the winter was showing no signs of stopping. Snowstorms came frequently, and even with the stove, it was difficult to stay warm. Peter avoided looking at many of

his companions now, for frostbite had begun to form on the tips of their fingers and noses. Seeing the black and blue appendages made them already appear dead.

During a break in one of the nastier storms, Peter and Morgan were sent out to gather sticks for the stove. Peter also planned on pocketing a few for his new paintbrushes, but nobody else had to know that. And while a few of the adults argued that children shouldn't be sent out into the weather, none of them had volunteered to take their place anyway. Mr. Stark would have if he'd been awake, but Peter wouldn't have let him. He was getting weaker every day.

Peter was afraid that if they sent him out, he might never come back.

Morgan and Peter trudged along through the snow and ice to the tree line. It was hard for her to keep up with her short legs, but what she lacked in speed she made up with enthusiasm.

"Isn't this fun? It's like going on an adventure," She commented idly, the snow almost up to her hips. Peter had offered to carry her (not that he might actually be able to do it) and she had declined. Sometimes Peter wondered how she'd ever managed to make it this far, let alone still be positive about any aspect of their new lives. The unbreakable child spirit, perhaps. Peter wished he still had one of those. It would be a whole lot better than dealing with Steve's pessimistic outlook and the NKVD's constant harsh treatment.

"Yeah, sure," Peter answered. A cold gust of wind blew past, whipping at his hair and stinging his eyes. He pulled his coat tighter against his body, but it had little effect. Being cold was as normal as waking up in the morning nowadays.

"I think there's something over there," Morgan pointed to a lump in the snow. She looked at Peter as if asking permission to check it out, and when he nodded, she ran (as best she could) over to it. When he got closer, he saw what Morgan was talking about. A large, white wing stuck out of the snow. It had to be at least two and a half feet long. And dead.

"It's a bird," Peter observed. Morgan nodded.

"We should take it back with us."

Peter blinked at her. How were they supposed to smuggle a large bird back to the jurta without being caught? Not many officers were out right now, if any at all . . . It might be possible. They pulled the bird, which turned out to be a snowy owl, out of the ground and dusted off as much snow as possible.

Without much thought, Peter tucked it under his coat and held it in place by crossing his arms over his chest. The owl was frozen, and Peter felt like he was hugging an ice cube. Morgan had taken over gathering enough sticks for their fire while Peter looked around anxiously. He wasn't worried so much about the officers . . . it was the other refugees he had to look out for. Everyone was desperate, and who knew what someone might do if they found out.

With Morgan's hands and pockets full and Peter's mind buzzing with anxiety, the two hiked back to the jurta. The beak of the bird shifted uncomfortably while Peter walked, poking him painfully in the chest several times. It was well worth it when they opened the door and presented their find to the group like a gold medal.

"Is that real?"

"How did you find that?"

"Oh my god!"

Peter explained that Morgan found it, and she smiled proudly. Most of the adults had written her off as crazy (which she definitely was) but were now giving her a second chance.

One of the Latvians who had been a farmer back home offered to clean and dress the bird while someone else got a fire going in their stove (a barrel pulled from the Laptev Sea mixed with some scrap metal). It took longer than most were willing to wait, but the jurta was filled with the delicious smell of food. Real food. Peter's mind wandered to some of the dishes his mother used to make for dinner. It still hurt to think of her, but sometime in the last months it had lessened from a sharp pain to a dull ache.

Not wanting to fall down the rabbit hole of memories, Peter distracted himself by taking a seat near Mr. Stark. He'd woken up when Peter and Morgan had gotten back and now seemed upset. He didn't mention it if he was, though. Instead Peter tucked himself into his side and listened as the wind began to pick up again. Not everything needed to be said out loud.

Peter sat near the stove, using one of his last pieces of paper to draw on. He sketched the bird Morgan had found a few weeks ago. He had woken up minutes before from a nightmare and needed a distraction. Over and over he saw the train platform when he closed his eyes. Over and over again he saw the people he'd come to know laying dead on the concrete, their blood seeping into the cracks.

He couldn't do it anymore. It was all too much. The not sleeping. The not eating. The constant worrying. Peter wanted to go home. He wanted to wake up from this nightmare and see his mother and father at the dining room table.

Tears began to gather in his eyes. Everything was so *unfair*. Why his family? Why him? Why was Russia on such a power trip? Why, why, why? Peter was too fed up with the whole situation to care that he sounded like a child. He used to swear up and down that he wasn't one—that he could take care of himself—but now all he wanted was to be one again.

Not wanting to wake the others up with the breakdown that was sure to follow, Peter tiptoed through the sleeping people and out into the night. The stars that shone brightly overhead reminded Peter of a simpler time.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed and can't wait to see you all on Monday for the last chapter + epilogue!

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Notes

Enjoy!

(I promise no one dies, for anyone who's read the original book. I didn't have the heart to kill anyone.)

July 1940

Peter slipped into the kitchen quietly, hoping that no one would notice him leaving the party. It was a family reunion for his father's side of the family. Harley was there, too, but Peter hadn't seen him since he got roped into talking with one of their great aunts.

He loosened his tie a bit before grabbing a soda from the pantry. The party was being held at his grandmother's house where he spent most of his time in the summer. It was mainly to help her around the farm – she was getting too old to do most of the landscaping herself—but he also enjoyed getting away from the city. There was always something new to sketch or study.

He enjoyed the peace and quiet of the kitchen, but the music and loud voices still filtered in through the door. Peter was contemplating heading back to the party when the door opened and Harley walked in.

“Wish I'd have known you'd come in here earlier. I could have used it as an excuse to get away from Aunt Justina,” He said by way of greeting. Peter laughed lightly.

“Was she that bad?”

“Yes. And I'm sure you already know that because I watched you dodge her all night.”

Peter held his hands up in mock defense. “Hey, you did the same thing. I'm just better at it.”

“Who says you're better?”

“Who's the one who spent twenty minutes talking to her about her dog?” Peter asked. Harley rolled his eyes before asking how Peter knew Justina talked about her dog the whole time. Peter shrugged.

“That's all she ever talks about, isn't it?”

“Fair point. Do you want to head out to the back field?”

The back field was a meadow behind their grandmother's house. It was filled with pink and yellow flowers during the spring but was nothing more than tall grasses in the summer. Peter and Harley had struck up a habit of leaving family parties and heading there to talk about the things they didn't put in their letters.

Peter agreed, and the pair left a note on the kitchen counter in case anyone missed them. Most of the guests were drunk, if not buzzed, and probably wouldn't even notice. They left a note anyway

because of an unfortunate incident where Aunt May had thought they'd been taken and a full scale search had been launched.

The walk to the meadow was short, and soon the two had chosen a spot where the grass was shorter than the rest. Harley quickly launched into a story about his newest love interest. She was a smart girl, top of their class, and had a particular interest in astronomy.

"I never liked it much, but she taught me most of the constellations. I can't pronounce all the names because they're in Greek or Latin. Ieva thinks that it's cute. I think that its embarrassing," Harley said, staring up at the sky. It was a new moon, which made studying constellations easier.

"What's that one?" Peter asked, pointing at a spoon-shaped cluster. Harley told him it was Ursa Minor. Peter had known that already, but he was curious as to whether Harley had learned as much from Ieva as he'd said.

"The star at the tip is called Polaris. Sailors used to use it to navigate, which is why many say it's the star that guides you home."

"Wow," Peter laughed. "You actually did learn a thing or two from your new girlfriend."

"She's not my girlfriend. At least not yet, anyway. I plan to ask her out next week when our town has the annual founder's festival. They have food and music and fireworks." Peter pretended not to notice the softness in his cousin's voice when he talked about Ieva, but Harley blushed about it anyway.

"I'm sure she'll say yes," Peter assured him. The girls always did.

Peter looked up to the sky and counted out the constellations he knew. There was Orion, the Pleiades . . . and Taurus, too. He recognized Pegasus, though only barely. Almost directly overhead sat Ursa Minor and Polaris. The north star. The star that guided you home.

Peter stared up at it like he was looking for something. Hope, perhaps. Hope that he and Mr. Stark would make it out of here.

Steve and Peter were working together on stacking firewood for the NKVD. It wasn't by choice—Steve was the last person Peter wanted to be working with. He didn't like talking about home, or here, or anything. Peter found it difficult to be around the man without feeling awkward.

A particularly strong gust of wind swept by, swirling up loose snow and dirt. Peter closed his eyes to avoid getting any in them, and when he opened them, Steve was standing in front of him expectantly.

"Can I borrow your scarf?" He asked, gesturing to the once-bright red scarf around Peter's neck. An older woman had given it to him in the ration line when she saw him shivering. He wished that he'd caught her name, but he hadn't seen her around since then.

"Why?" Peter responded defensively. Deep down he heard his parents voice telling him to be generous and hand it over, but the new part of him, the survival part, told him to hold it tight and never let go.

"Because I'm freezing. I'll give it back, don't worry."

Peter kept staring at him, and Steve offered to give him information on his parents. The ideas

warred in his head. Of course, he wanted information on them, and Steve knew that. But was anything Steve said going to be true? People had lied to him for less.

“Fine,” Peter said finally, tugging the scarf loose and handing it over. He instantly missed the protection it provided and almost regretted lending it to him, no matter how short the time. “So where are my parents?”

“I don’t know.”

“Then what do you know? You said you’d give me information—”

“And I will,” Steve whispered, pulling Peter towards the pile of unstacked logs. Peter’s voice had risen and attracted the attention of the NKVD. They lost interest after a few minutes and Steve began to talk again.

“I don’t know where they are or if they’re still alive, but I can tell you why you’re here.”

“I already know why I’m here. My parents were involved with dangerous stuff.” Peter couldn’t believe he’d given up the scarf for something he already knew. He should have made Steve tell him the information first.

“Is that what Tony told you? Dangerous stuff?” Steve asked incredulously. “What we were doing wasn’t just dangerous, it’s considered treason. The lot of us should have been shot instead of arrested. Would have saved a lot of trouble, truthfully.”

“Can you get to the point, please?”

“Your parents helped your aunt and uncle escape. Forged papers for them to repatriate through Germany and then travel to the United States. It was a hell of a job, actually. But someone started asking too many questions, and the trail led back to them.”

Peter stopped stacking wood for a moment and simply stared at Steve. Germany?

Early July 1940

The front door was already unlocked when Peter got home. Him and Ned had spent their afternoon at the local art museum. Art wasn’t really Ned’s thing, but Peter had been so thrilled about the newest exhibit that he couldn’t say no.

“The mail just arrived, sweetheart. You’ve got a letter from Harley in here,” His mother said, glancing up at him briefly from her spot in the living room. He strode over and took the letter excitedly. Harley hadn’t written back in nearly a month and he was eager to learn of what had kept him so busy.

Peter took the letter to his room and opened it. It was shorter than Peter expected, but he was glad that he’d received one at all. They wrote rather often, and it was odd to go so long without.

Peter,

I’m sorry that I haven’t written in so long. My parents have been hellbent on ridding our apartment of clutter, and I was roped into the process. Now we have little more than what one might be able to fit in a suitcase, but I can’t complain. There’s less for me to clean up with my daily chores.

Aside from that, the two of them have been rather on edge lately. Mom is nervous about our upcoming trip to Germany, though I'm not sure why. We are only visiting her family. On second thought, that might be why she's nervous.

We leave tomorrow, but I will be sure to write you once we arrive. I'm sure mom's family will have some things to send along as well. Despite meeting them only once, you seem to be the favorite.

Signed,

Harley

The trip to Germany had never been about visiting family. That was why Aunt May and Uncle Ben were so nervous. They were fleeing the Soviet Union *and* the war.

He loved Aunt May and Uncle Ben and Harley . . . but it was hard not to be bitter that their freedom had cost him his. Peter didn't hate them, of course not. He couldn't. But there's something funny about survival, about the way it changes someone.

Before, Peter would have never thought twice about giving up his freedom so that his family could have theirs. Before, Peter would have lent Steve his scarf without a second thought. But things were different now. The rules of the game had changed. Peter wanted to survive. He wanted to live.

Peter wished they weren't being watched by the NKVD because he wanted to do something. *Anything*. Scream, cry, curl up into a ball. While he contemplated doing all of them, another thought struck him. Had Mr. Stark known?

"Did Mr. Stark know?" He asked, voice rougher than he would have liked. Steve nodded.

"Of course. He handled most of it."

Peter shook his head to himself. . . *He didn't tell me. He knew and he didn't tell me.*

Tony was standing at the back of the ration line when Peter stormed up to him. The kid, who was usually so kind, wore a scowl on his face to rival Steve Rogers. It wasn't often that Peter came up to him full of anger, and Tony tried to think of who it was directed at. He was shocked to learn that it was himself when Peter started to yell.

"How could you?" He asked, eyes filling with tears. Tony stared at him, mouth open while he tried to form an answer.

"You knew that the reason I'm here—that my family is here—is because of May and Ben and Harley. Why didn't you tell me? Why didn't anybody tell me?"

"Who told you that?" Tony questioned, mind running through the list of people who knew that information. Natasha might have known, but what were the chances that she'd sought Peter out to tell him? The rest of the NKVD most likely knew as well. They could have done it to make the poor kid that much more hurt.

"Steve told me. In exchange for my scarf," Peter said. He reached up to his neck like he'd just realized that he'd never gotten the scarf back. Oh well, there was later. He could think about the stupid red scarf later.

"Son of a bitch," Tony muttered. He was exhausted and wanted nothing more than to go back to

the jurta and lie down and never get back up. And as much as he hated to say it this way, he was now dealing with an angry Peter Parker because of one stupid Steve Rogers. They'd never been the best of friends, but Tony wished for once that he didn't have so much to worry about.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"It wasn't something you needed to know," Tony tried. He hoped that Peter would take that answer, but he didn't.

"What do you mean something I didn't need to know? Why wouldn't I have needed to know the reason I was arrested?"

Peter was right. Tony sighed and told him the truth.

"I didn't tell you because I didn't want you to hate them. I wanted to keep your memory of them clean. That way you wouldn't have had to feel the way you feel now. Angry. Betrayed, even. Because that's not what it is or why your parents did it. Mary and Richard sent Ben and May to America with the hope of sending you soon after."

Tony could see the conflicting emotions in Peter's eyes. The line moved up, but they stayed still.

"I'm sorry," Tony continued, "I just . . . You already had so much to deal with. I thought it was best not to add those feelings to the mix."

Peter considered this, and eventually, accepted the answer. He yawned, and Tony was left wondering whether he was fine with what Tony had done or if he was too tired to care anymore. Either way, Tony was glad. He was too tired to argue about it, too.

The fire in the stove burned low, barely casting a glow across the jurta. Peter had stayed awake to tend to Mr. Stark, who was now as pale and cold as ever. It didn't seem to matter what anyone did—the heated bricks, extra blankets, warm food—because nothing worked. It made Peter want to scream. He wanted to throw a fit. It was so *unfair*. Mr. Stark had been there to help him when he'd needed it, and Peter couldn't do the same.

Peter glanced to where Mr. Stark was sleeping next to him. He'd taken everything extra they'd had and practically piled it on top of him. He'd tried to give the man his rations, too, but Mr. Stark refused to take them. It didn't matter what he tried to tell anyone; he was too selfless. Peter couldn't believe he hadn't noticed that he was sick sooner. *I could have done more, I could have—have done something. Anything.*

Exhaustion took over much too soon for Peter's taste. He could barely keep his head up, let alone force his eyes open. He laid down despite the voice in his head screaming for him to stay awake. He didn't want to sleep in case of nightmares, or worse, something happening with Mr. Stark.

When it became too much to fight, Peter crawled over to his spot beside Mr. Stark and laid his head against the man's chest. Peter listened to his heartbeat, assuring himself that he was alive. Mr. Stark was still here. He wasn't alone.

"Thank you for everything you did for me," He whispered quietly. "I—I don't know where I'd be if you weren't there for me. I acted pretty ungrateful sometimes, but I really appreciate it. If it weren't for you, I'd be back in that field."

Peter's eyes burned as he began to cry. It had taken him so long to realize that even though his

parents were gone that didn't mean he didn't have anyone looking out for him.

"You took care of me even though you didn't have to. And, um, I'm not ready for you to go. I'm not ready to do this by myself. I *can't* do this by myself. You were there for me when my parents couldn't be and I . . . I still need you. Please don't leave me here. Please," Peter pleaded, his breathing picking up pace as he struggled with the idea that he might have to do this alone if things didn't get better.

"I—I can't do it. Please don't leave me here alone, I can't do it. I can't, I can't, I can't," Peter quickly worked himself into a panic until he couldn't breathe. No matter how hard he tried he couldn't force the air into lungs. He closed his eyes and wondered if this was what dying felt like.

A soft voice told him to focus on breathing and Peter wanted to shout, "I'm trying too!" Instead he listened to the voice and tried to calm down. Breathe in. Breathe out. After a few minutes when Peter felt that he could breathe again, he opened his eyes and saw that Mr. Stark was awake. He stammered out an apology for accidentally waking him up, but he wouldn't hear it.

"You don't get to be sorry about this, Peter. You would have passed out if someone hadn't helped you," Mr. Stark said. Then added reassuringly, "And I'm not going anywhere. You aren't going to have to do this alone."

"What if you can't be? What if you—" Peter stopped short. He couldn't even say it.

"I won't," Mr. Stark promised. Peter shook his head.

"You can't promise that."

"Too late, kiddo, I already did. And I don't break my promises." Mr. Stark smiled comfortingly. Peter sighed.

"I'm holding you to that," He said. He wasn't kidding in the slightest.

"I wouldn't expect any different."

Epilogue

Chapter Notes

Here we are . . . at the very end. I don't know how to feel (I mean I'm very excited, ya know, but I'm also sad that this is finally over! I mean, I've been working on this since January, and now I've got to find something else to do!)

I'm so grateful to all of you who read this fic and left comments/kudos, and I sincerely hope that you liked this story! Also, I'm sorry that that ending wasn't very happy, but I thought it was more true to the original story itself to keep it darker.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It was a sunny day in Kaunas, Lithuania. Streets bustled, citizens rushing from one engagement to the other. Many of the passerby stopped to observe the construction workers curiously. One dad crouched next to his daughter, pointing out each piece of equipment and explaining its use. The little girl looked thrilled, as if this was the most interesting thing that had ever happened to her.

Another older couple looked on, expressions downcast. They leaned in closer, whispering to each other uneasily. Even with the Soviets finally out of Lithuania, some still were afraid of being overheard. Old habits die hard. Especially ones so ingrained in the psyche of a nation.

Away from the passerby, a construction worker was digging. He paused every so often to wipe the sweat from his brow or take a deep drink from the water bottle clipped to his waistband. Like many others on this crew, he did not take their job lightly. Many of them had family affected by the population transfers and building a monument—a testament—to their strength was not something to slack off on.

The scars left by the Soviet Union ran deep in Lithuania, barely hidden beneath the surface. While the monument couldn't be expected to fix every wound, it felt like a step in the right direction. It told them they didn't have to hide anymore. They could be honest, they could share the horrible experiences they'd suffered with the only ones who would truly understand.

Somewhere across the site, a worker called out, "I found something!"

This didn't hold much weight because they were digging where an old apartment building used to be, and people found all sorts of odd stuff while on the clock.

"If it's just another hairbrush, Darius, we aren't interested." The worker nearest him called out exasperatedly. Darius, definitely the most over-eager of the crew, called out each of his findings like they were gold.

"It isn't," Darius said, stooping over in his pit to pick up the object. It had sounded like glass when the tip of his shovel struck it. After picking it up, Darius thought it must have been a miracle that it didn't break. The item was a glass jar, the outside covered in cracked dirt. He used the bottom of his plain t-shirt to wipe away some of the grime, revealing something that resembled paper inside.

"It's a jar. It looks like it has something in it."

“Like what?”

“I don’t know, I’m going to try opening it.” Darius twisted the metal cap and grimaced as it screeched unpleasantly. Finally, the metal gave way and Darius put the lid in his pocket before peering into the jar. It was certainly paper inside, but there were too many pieces to count. The papers were rolled up tightly and bound with a worn piece of string.

Darius untied the string gently and placed that in his pocket, too. He examined the papers before calling out, “It looks like a letter. There’s drawings in here too.”

The drawings, mostly done in pencil but a few in blue pen, were of seemingly random things. One of them was a valley filled with people sitting on the grass. The page behind that one had quick sketches of many different people, but even so they looked accurate. Two of the faces bore a passing resemblance. The next page was a crudely drawn map written on with smudged words the workers couldn’t quite read, though they looked Russian. Paper after paper, page after page, held sketches of mundane things such as forests to extremely detailed sketches of a boy with striking eyes.

Darius pulled the letter out of the stack last. By now he’d gained the interest of the other worker, who was standing next to him. They read the letter silently.

To whom it may concern: Inside this jar are the drawings and writings of a people forgotten, of a people buried deep beneath the Russian ice. While many are graphic—and rightfully so—my intention is not to scare you. My intention is to banish the ignorance that surrounds us like a fog, and to ensure that we are not forever lost in it’s dark, obscuring, swirling depths.

For the Soviets will try and cover us up, hide us, bury our voices deep enough so that they may never be heard again. They will tell you that our stories are just lies, pieces of fiction, but they are not. These stories, and the people in them, are as real as you are. They are as real as the sky above you and the dirt you stand on.

We were not criminals, as history has surely led you to believe. We were a nation lost in the chaos of a world caught between two devils. And now, in whichever time this letter finds you in, we only ask one thing of you:

Don’t let us stay lost.

Find us.

Peter Benjamin Parker and Anthony Edward Stark

Kaunas, Lithuania

1953

Chapter End Notes

I can't say it enough; thank you so much for reading!!! I love you all so much and I hope to see you on whatever my next project ends up being (as of right now, it's looking like a follow up to when I'm lost (I feel so very found)!)

Scream with me on [Tumblr!](#)

[Support me on Ko-Fi, or commission a fic!](#)

End Notes

Thank you so much for reading this week's chapter, I look forward to seeing you next time!

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!